GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Introduction: When the Impossible Knocks

By Lanie Millar | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** Were you to write a (pre-?) history of the field, what are the names and texts it would include?
- **Methods:** What does the research process (identifying materials, fieldwork, archival research, and dealing with lack of access to materials, etc.) look like in the context of building connections between Africa and Latin America?
- **Futures:** What is (or could be) the relationship of scholarship on Latin America-Africa to other possible South-South comparisons?

While literary and cultural comparisons bridging Latin America and Africa have only relatively recently found institutional space, sites of encounter and discussion among African and Latin American artists and intellectuals have a much longer history. Throughout the twentieth century, artists and intellectuals met, wrote to and about each other, and theorized points of connection and differences among their experiences, histories, and artistic expressions. My brief comments will use this history to think about the following prompts the editors of this conversation have suggested: a pre-history of the field of Latin American-African comparison and the research process (identifying materials, fieldwork, archival research, and dealing with lack of access to materials, etc.) in the context of building connections between Africa and Latin America, which lead to a suggestion regarding the relationship of scholarship on Latin America-Africa to other possible South-South comparisons.

A pre-history for our field would have to look to the series of congresses and meetings that took place over the course of the twentieth century, beginning with the meetings of the Pan-African Congresses of the early twentieth century, and continuing with the series of meetings with which most scholars working in these areas are already familiar: the Black Artists and Writers' conferences in Paris (1956) and Rome (1959), the Cultural Congress of Havana (1968), and the Négritude and Latin America conference in Dakar (1974), among others. It is through these meetings that we can trace the discourses through which Latin American and African experiences and cultural expressions begin to be read together: discourses of pan-African identity, Négritude, tricontinentalism, and third-world internationalism, which lead into concepts of the Black Atlantic, Global South Atlantic, and Global South. In many cases, these are the discourses on which contemporary scholars have built our own comparative projects. What is evident from such a prehistory is that the politics and the ethics of an African-Latin American comparative axis are anti- and decolonial. This is obvious enough so as to perhaps not need articulating, but it is worth signaling, as it helps to both organize and open our field to different grounds for comparison as well as opening it to genealogies that see the Atlantic routes in increasingly complex ways.

A clear articulation of racial solidarity between Africa and the African diaspora in the Americas is evident, for example, in meetings from the first half of the twentieth century, as well as accompanying political and artistic programs focused on political independence and the rehabilitation of Black cultural expressions. Aimé Césaire's address to the 1956 Paris Congress, for example, speaks against an understanding of the units of analysis of culture as solely national or unified by language, arguing that the solidarity that links the participants is both "horizontal… created by the colonial or semicolonial or paracolonial situation that has been imposed on us from without" as well as "vertical," a historical solidarity in the expansion of cultures throughout the world that originate in African cultures (2010, 129-30). Frantz Fanon's addresses at both the 1956 Paris and 1959 Rome conferences foreground the national liberation question as foundational to cultural production—controversially, as scholars such as Christopher Bonner (2019) and David Macey (2001) have noted—that becomes a central focus of subsequent meetings. Contributions to the Cultural Congress of Havana in 1968 also take this tack: Haitian poet René Depestre's call for decolonization through revolution (2015, 125) as the key to a new culture echoes Angolan intellectual Mário Pinto de Andrade's claim that "a new literature rises from the fire of combat" (2024, 47). This new literature is already evident, according to both authors, in the revolutionary Cuba of the 1960s.

The discussions carried out at these conferences reveal the ways that intellectuals who engaged with each other at such meetings thought about the intersections between Latin American and African cultural and political questions. Their conversations thus allow us to trace subsequent scholarship that examines Latin American and African cultural expression in more expansive ways. The varied delegations in attendance at these conferences (including participants from still-colonized areas of the globe as well as Europe, the United States, and Latin America) and the contributions of speakers to these conferences make it clear that questions of colonization and underdevelopment as well as issues of racial solidarity were dynamic topics of debate—and disagreement—from a wide variety of perspectives and political situations. This expansive participation reveals that congress attendees saw these questions as relevant for diverse communities from across geographies and languages. A broad understanding of the intersections between cultural and political decolonization, racial solidarity, and revolutionary praxis drawn from these congresses thus allows us to conceive of comparison as expanding outward from the two primary axes that have defined comparison in the Atlantic world: the routes of European conquest (the Europe-Africa or Europe-Americas axes) and the route of the Middle Passage (the Africa-Americas axis), defined by permanent displacement and the profound bodily and epistemological violence of enslavement. In the context of the twentieth-century congresses, new routes of comparison thus become legible: the influence of Black writers and artists from the Americas on African cultural development, for example; the cross-pollination among Latin American and North American poets, as well as points of tension and resistance that emerge from these networks of communication.

When we map comparison in this way, a zig-zagging movement across the Atlantic and around the continents, islands, and seas that comprise the African and Latin American regions becomes visible. That is, we can find routes of comparison that expand beyond conceptualizing African cultures as originary and tracing how they are subsequently adapted in the diaspora. Similarly, we can read understandings of political decolonization as

encompassing thinkers and areas beyond just those on the African continent and/ or under direct colonial occupation. Such a reconfiguration leads us to contemporary scholarship in historically-based studies around particular encounters, events, and engagements: Estefanía Bournot's work (2022) on Latinité, Pan-Africanism and Négritude, Sarah Quesada's book (2022) on African roots in key figures in contemporary Caribbean and Latinx literatures, or my own book (2019) on Cuban and Angolan narrative during and after the Cold War. These are studies that move in multiple directions across and around the Atlantic. We can also trace important works of what might be considered asynchronous or asymmetrical comparison, such as Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra's book (2019) on the dictator novel from the nineteenth-century classic *Facundo* (1845)by Argentine Domingo Faustino Sarmiento to Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006),and Stefan Helgesson's recent study (2022) of the co-constitution of decolonization and critical literary practice in Brazil, Senegal, South Africa, and Eastern Africa.

This leads me to the second question I will address, which are the challenges of the research process: materials, archives, and fieldwork. As any critic undertaking comparative work rooted in the Global South will confirm, building an archive in places with histories of enslavement and colonial occupation can be difficult, as the structural legacies of these phenomena create barriers. These barriers might take the form of the particularities of institutional development and limited access, the uneven conservation of material artifacts, and the limited access of writers in parts of Latin America and Africa to publication and circulation, especially outside their home regions. For example, while writing my book *Forms of Disappointment: Cuban and Angolan Narrative After the Cold War* (2019), it was extraordinarily difficult to access the films and newsreels that formed some of the earliest and most important artifacts of feelings of solidarity and disappointment that Cubans and Angolans shared while Cuba was involved in the Angolan war (1976-1991). I was not able to find archives in Cuba or Angola that provided public access to the films I knew about, or as a result discover additional ones that surely do or did exist. This situation might stem from the precarious states of preservation of materials, or because institutions lacked the infrastructure to be able to make them available to researchers. I was able to view some films in disperse libraries in the U.S., on (sometimes ephemeral) websites, or through the generosity of individuals such as Cuban director Emilio Óscar Alcalde, who sent me a copy of his undistributed film *El encanto del regreso* (1991), which allowed me to write briefly about this important film in my book. Like other researchers of African-Latin American comparison, I had to start with a premise of *incompleteness*, building a study out of the artifacts I could find and access while knowing there were many others that remained unknown or unavailable.

In parallel to the structural barriers to archival and textual materials, the question of what languages the producers of the texts and cultural objects we study use, who has access to those languages in places that conserve colonial languages, and what cultural manifestations take place in what in Lusophone Africa—one of the sites of my own research—are termed "national languages" (*línguas nacionais*),presents another challenge. This phenomenon was also a central concern of the intellectuals who circulated as part of the twentieth-century meetings I have outlined above, as well as the topic of a significant body of postcolonial theory and criticism by theorists such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba, as well as such figures as Lydia Cabrera and Gilberto Freyre.[1] I would also add that it comprises an ongoing challenge to the institutional

legibility of Latin America-Africa comparison, and South-South comparison more generally.

Many or most scholars working at the intersections of Africa and Latin America work in multiple languages. I don't think it would be too sweeping to say that regardless of how many languages we publish or research in, however, most or all of us are also working alongside languages and linguistic traditions that we do not have access to as well as with materials that have persisted in incomplete or partial states of preservation or access. The necessity for travel (and funding to support that travel), language maintenance and cultural familiarity, and an ethics of collaboration with interlocutors often located at far remove from each other require humility from scholars dedicated to these projects. Alongside humility in terms of our own individual abilities and capacities, these factors make plain that all such comparative scholarship is collaborative: we depend on the expertise and insights of many other scholars, artists, librarians, and archivists with different access; the sharing of primary and secondary materials; and the outright generosity of others we encounter while carrying out our research. We thus are constantly placed in situations where we must acknowledge our *non-mastery*, or incomplete mastery, of the materials we write about, as well as of areas adjacent to or outside of our scholarly training that are always part of Africa-Latin America comparison.

Rather than a colonial presumption to "*dominar*"—the verb in Spanish and Portuguese that means both "to dominate" and "to master"—the languages, traditions, and cultural objects of our study, I think these factors demand from scholars working in our fields the recognition of what Édouard Glissant has called opacity, which in turn requires of us an ethical gesture of humility and generosity in the face of interlocutors and materials that must always remain partially or completely inaccessible to us. In her work on a range of key twentieth-century anti-colonial thinkers and writers, Juliette Singh has theorized the implicit and explicit violence that accompanies "mastery" when understood as requiring full submission of the object or entity that is *mastered*. For Singh, mastery requires "splitting" the object or entity—or splitting from it—to establish boundaries between the master and the mastered, and thus its complete "subordination," in a process that extends over time, making the master and his mastery of the other seem permanent (2018, 12-14). The violence inherent to mastery, as Singh theorizes it, is antithetical to the spirit of the anti-colonial and decolonial politics that animate the trajectory of Africa-Latin American comparison that I have traced above, and that forms the core of much—or most—of such contemporary scholarship as well.

My argument is not that scholars should eschew pursuing serious linguistic competence, immersive cultural and textual familiarity, or expansive exposure to the networks of texts, objects, and people that comprise our areas of focus. Rather, it is that any such pursuit be conscious of its own limitations and contingencies. A scholarly position "against mastery," for comparatists working in Latin America and Africa, therefore, can also be a strength in serving as a model for other modes of South-South comparison: a research practice that responds to the points of resistance and opacity between sites of comparison. A conscious recognition of our *lack* of mastery in carrying out our scholarship in turn requires us to be open to revision and collaboration and to acknowledge our dependence on the expertise of many others, and thus should reflect the decolonial ethics that originate and make possible the composition of this field.

References

Andrade, Mário Pinto de. 2024 [1968]. “Culture and Armed Struggle.” *The Revolution Will Be a Poetic Act: African Culture and Decolonization*, edited by Lanie Millar, translated by Lanie Millar and Fabienne Moore, 44–49. New York: Polity Books.

Armillas-Tiseyra, Magalí. 2019. *The Dictator Novel. Writers and Politics in the Global South*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Bonner, Christopher. 2019. “Alioune Diop and the Cultural Politics of Negritude: Reading the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists, 1956.” *Research in African Literatures* 50, no. 2: 1–18.

Bournot, Estefanía. 2022. “‘A Feeling of Belonging’ – América Latina en los festivales panafricanos (1966-1977).” In *Geografías Caleidoscópicas: América Latina y sus imaginarios intercontinentales*, edited by Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger, Koichi Hagimoto, 75–96. Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert.

—. 2022. “*Négritude et Amérique Latine*: From the Black South Atlantic to the Third World.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 59, no. 1: 77-93.

Césaire, Aimé. 2010 [1956]. “Culture and Colonization,” translated by Brent Hayes Edwards. *Social Text*, 28, no. 2 : 127–44.

Depestre, René. 2015 [1968]. “The Winding Course of Negritude.” In *Souffles-Anfas: A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics*, edited by Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio, translated by Laura Reeck, 120-125. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 1959. “Fondement réciproque de la culture nationale et des luttes de libération.” *Présence Africaine*, no. 24/25: 82–89.

—. 1956. “Racisme et culture.” *Présence Africaine*, no. 8/10: 122–31.

Glissant, Édouard. 1997 [1990]. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Helgesson, Stefan. 2022. *Decolonisations of Literature. Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Macey, David. 2001. *Frantz Fanon: A Biography*. New York: Picador.

Millar, Lanie. 2019. *Forms of Disappointment. Cuban and Angolan Narrative After the Cold War*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Quesada, Sarah M. 2022. *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Singh, Julietta. 2018. *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Durhamm, NC: Duke University Press.

[1] Key texts in this vast bibliography include anticolonial writings such as Léopold Sédar Senghor's *Liberté V: Le Dialogue des cultures* (1993); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba's "On the Abolition of the English Department" (1968), as well as studies of African linguistic roots in Caribbean and Brazilian language and cultural expression such as Lydia Cabrara's *La lengua sagrada de los Ñáñigos* (1988) or Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-grande e senzala* (1933), a pro-colonial text that nonetheless documented important evidence of African cultural transmission to Brazil.

About the Authors

Lanie Millar is Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Oregon, where she teaches and researches about Caribbean and Luso-Afro-Brazilian literatures and cultures. She is the author of *Forms of Disappointment. Cuban and Angolan Narrative After the Cold War* (SUNY Press, 2019), which argues that late 20th and early 21st century Cuban and Angolan novels enact a poetics of disappointment: narrative techniques which constitute a new formal and affective relationship to the histories of revolution shared across the South Atlantic. She is the editor and co-translator with Fabienne Moore of the volume *The Revolution Will Be a Poetic Act: African Culture and Decolonization* (Polity, 2024), essays by Angolan intellectual Mário Pinto de Andrade (1928-1990) on African liberation, national development, and Black cultural vindication. Her current research focuses on the intersection of race, gender, and empire especially in contemporary cultural texts about African empires in Angola, Brazil, and Mozambique.

How to Cite

Millar, Lanie. March 29, 2025. "Comparison Against Mastery." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Sophie Esch | March 29, 2025

- **Methods:** What are the core competencies and methodologies of Latin America-Africa scholarship?
- **Futures:** What is (or could be) the relationship of scholarship on Latin America-Africa to other possible South-South comparisons?

> *l'errant, qui n'est plus le voyageur ni le découvreur ni le conquérant, cherche à connaitre la totalité du monde et sait déjà qu'il ne l'accomplira jamais–et qu'en cela réside la beauté menacée du monde*
> Glissant

When pondering the question of core competencies and methodologies of scholarship on

Latin America-Africa, I find myself returning to a recent classic in Afro-Caribbean thought: *Poétique de la relation* (1990; *Poetics of Relation*, 1997) by the Martinican Édouard Glissant (1928-2011). His poetics of relation "in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" offers a vision for a capacious comparative-relational methodology (1997, 11). As someone who has come to the field of transregional South-South comparisons as a Latin Americanist—that is: as someone who was not trained as an Africanist or a comparatist—I am particularly drawn to Glissant's notion of "errantry" *(l'errance*). I hope it will also speak to others looking to expand the gaze, scope, or connectivity of their scholarship, especially in regards to South-South cultural flows, entanglements, and resonances. In what follows, I parse out some of the relevant principles of Glissant's poetics of relation for research that links Africa and Latin America: errantry and humility; rhizomes over roots; and collaborative multilingualism.

Errantry and Humility

In academia, knowledge tends to operate in neatly marked and contained boxes: compartmentalized and departmentalized. As such, comprehensiveness, coverage, and "mastery" of one's specialty or subfield are usually paramount (e.g. the comprehensive exams of most literature graduate programs in the US). Glissant's proposal of "errantry" espouses an entirely different approach. In the aphoristic lyricism that characterizes his writing, he declares that "one who is errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides" (1997, 20). It is a powerful sentiment whose many layers are worth unpacking.

Errantry stands for "wandering" and expansiveness. In terms of scholarship, it entails moving beyond one's "area" and one's "language(s)" and to roam with curiosity and without a clear, preconceived path. In *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant rejects ideas of totality and argues instead for the "right to opacity" of cultures, societies, beings, and texts (1997, 189). Thus, errantry is an attitude that is not about "revealing" or "explaining" a culture but rather "a way of living the unity-diversity of the world" (1997, 79). In Glissant, errantry is fundamentally a non-colonial gesture in contrast to knight errantry, which was often highly colonial in nature (think the crusading knights in the Levant or the second sons of noblemen trying to make riches as *hidalgos* in the Americas). Rather than knighthood, we ought to think about errantry in relation to the "Wanderjahre" or "Walz," the still existing European guild tradition in which craftspeople, after finishing their apprenticeship, go on several journeying years to learn additional skills. This also fits well with the "craftsman attitude" any scholar should have as they go about their research and writing—indeed, *their* craft (Jensen 2017).

Errantry is also about intellectual humility and letting go of the notion of mastery (see Singh 2018). Once errant, the expert or the scholar turns into a wanderer. Rather than a teacher, they become a student, an apprentice, a journeywoman. For many scholars, engaging in Latin American-African studies will entail having to acquire and hone new skills, since most will have come up through a disciplinary path and thus not have equal training in both "areas." Latin American literature (Spanish & Portuguese) and Caribbean literature (French, Spanish, or English) are mostly taught separately from African literature (usually in English or French) and comparative literature has traditionally favored North-North or North-South over South-South comparisons (even for those few who might have studied in a more progressive

and more open-minded literature department, blind spots and gaps in knowledge will, undoubtedly, remain). For academics trained to master their little box, venturing beyond one's intellectual foundation can be daunting. One needs to have what in my mother tongue is called, "Mut zur Lücke," which can be loosely translated as "daring to have gaps in knowledge." Such an admission requires humility in approach and attitude (see also Lanie Millar's reflection on this topic in this volume). Coming from the Latin *errare*, errantry contains both the notion "to wander" and "to err." It allows for making and (admitting) mistakes and gaps in knowledge. Many academics do not like to admit such gaps, but such humility is necessary for straying outside the bounds of their discipline. By advocating "Mut zur Lücke," I am not championing ignorance or dilettantism. In fact, this academic pursuit happens with the aforementioned "craftsman attitude" in mind: slow, deliberate, and building upon skills already acquired.

In recent years, I have been an errant scholar, and it has been a time of learning and growth, in equal measures exhilarating and unsettling. As so often in one's intellectual development, it was a course that made such an impression on me that, in the long-term, it shifted my focus. In 2011, I took a graduate seminar on Luso-African literature and read Mozambican, Angolan, and Cabo Verdean fiction for the first time. Throughout the class, I was painfully aware of my lack of specialized knowledge in African literature and history: when you have such specialized knowledge in one area, you are more aware of all that you do not know about another one (a class with Afro-Portuguese scholar and performance artist Grada Kilomba in Berlin in the 2000s also had driven that point home). Yet there were also moments in the texts that felt familiar or that I could (at least partially) understand from a Latin Americanist perspective—as Glissant puts it, "What best emerges from Relation is what one senses" (1997, 174). Inspired by all the resonances I sensed between these literatures, in 2012, Luso-Africanist Ana Catarina Teixeira and I co-organized a seminar on postwar and postrevolutionary literature in Luso-Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean at the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA). But then, as often happens, I had to turn my attention to my dissertation and to mastering my little box and subfields: Latin American, and especially Mexican and Central American literature. Any wanderings in Luso-African literature would have to wait until I published my first book in 2018. But ever since, I have spent a lot of time wandering and learning: improving language skills, reading (a lot), traveling to several African countries, and finding interlocutors across the world willing to teach me and engage my questions (many of whom are contributors to this dossier).

I want to be clear that my highlighting errantry as method is not a case against area studies. Curiosity about Luso-African literature made me want to do comparative work, but I approached the task of acquiring new skills with the sensitivity of someone in area studies. Area studies have fallen out of favor in recent years, but I still believe in their relevance: their emphasis on deep immersion in the languages, cultures, politics, and histories of a specific region are a necessary corrective to claims of supposed universalism. Area studies, especially in the USA, are tainted by their history of working—knowingly or obliviously—at the service of US imperial and capitalist interests during the twentieth century (especially but not only during the Cold War). But such area studies always existed in confluence and divergence with a regional studies critical of these interests, informed by autochthonous regional thought, aimed at liberation, and acting in solidarity: in short a *latinoamericanismo* in the leftist

tradition. For me, this how area studies presented themselves when I was studying *Lateinamerikanistik* in Berlin in the early 2000s: a mix of autochthonous Latin American thought and cultural production, especially from the 1960s and 1970s (dependency theory, liberation theology, the aesthetics of the Boom, transculturation, etc.) combined with more recent readings in postcolonial, poststructuralist, feminist theory, and writings on hybridity and transnationalism.

Rhizomes over Roots

A key element in Glissant's thinking is that he favors the rhizome over the root. He prefers rhizomatic "'expansion' over 'depth'" (1997, 77). His conception of identity is relational rather than essentialist. As such he is also critical of the Négritude movement, Aimé Césaire, and any notion of a rooted identity or a return to Africa and African roots, in which Africa often appears as a "a mirage, retained in a simplified representation" (1997, 58). Glissant begins *Poétique de la Relation* with the transatlantic slave trade: the ship and the middle passage. But he thinks of the middle passage more as a rupture ("the abyss") and is skeptical of any notion of an unbroken link between contemporary Africans and the descendants of slaves in the Americas. Instead, Glissant was more interested in cultural mixing and espoused *antillanité* and *créolisation* as key concepts. Glissant had his gaze firmly set on the Caribbean and Latin America, and less so on Africa. Nonetheless, methodologically, his ideas about the poetics of relation work well for any type of scholarship interested in South-South comparisons/relationalities. Evidence of this can be found in Shu-Mei Shih's influential work. A US-based comparatist, Asianist, and former ACLA president (2021-2022), Shih developed concepts such as "comparison as relation" and "minor transnationalism" on the basis of Glissant's thought (Rabke 2017; Shih 2013 and 2015). Scholars in Caribbean, hemispheric American, and transatlantic comparative studies have also long relied on Glissant (Ette 2016; Müller/Ueckmann 2013; Quesada 2022; Russ 2010).

Even though Glissant is averse to the root, his own thought has clear roots (or at least a fertile soil from which the rhizome expands) in Caribbean, Latin American, and French thought. Informed by the French tradition, Glissant prefers the Deleuzian rhizome over the root, and by the Latin American tradition, he channels the region's baroque sensibility and its expansiveness. He reflects on "le tout-monde" via creolization and the baroque. This means he develops a universal method from the specific position and insight the Caribbean and Latin America provides. Herein lies the beauty of Glissant's errant method: its intellectual rootedness in several traditions yet its world-wide gaze and applicability, even if Glissant himself might not agree with this characterization regarding its rootedness.

Collaborative Multilingualism

Without multilingualism, there is no poetics of relation. Glissant repeatedly stresses the need to resist "the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent" (1997, 19) and renounces "an arrogant, monolingual separateness" in favor of participating "in worldwide entanglement" (1997, 118). That any scholarship wanting to engage both Africa and Latin America would need to be multilingual is self-evident but bears repeating. Africa and Latin America are multilingual continents or regions. At the same time as it advocates multilingualism, Glissant's poetics of relation prepare the scholar for the impossibility of the task (hundreds of languages are spoken in Africa and Latin America), of achieving totality. Glissant points to the

always incomplete nature and project of a truly comparative world literature: it can only always be the quest, as apprehension of the totality of the world and its literatures never achieved—but therein lies the "beauty of this world."

In "Conjectures on World Literature," an early articulation of the principle of "distant" reading, Franco Moretti (2000) declared that "Reading 'more' seems hardly to be the solution" (55). But what if it is, in a way? What if therein lies the beauty of the work and the journey, rather than staying within the safe zone of parochialism, monolingualism, and Eurocentrism? There remains, of course, the question of how to go about the need for multilingual research since one's ability to learn languages and read a region's literature are finite. Artificial intelligence will surely change things and put distant reading and big data back on the table, but the future that I wish for is one firmly built around human interpersonal relations. When wondering about the future of South-South work, I can only think of it in collaborative terms: working across languages, pooling resources and knowledge, co-authoring manuscripts, and wandering together (contrary to a knight-errant's lonesome endeavors). Embracing errantry and letting go of "mastery" stresses the need for companions, *compañeras,* to share the road and the load. So, what do I hope for? An errant, expansive, multilingual, and collaborative scholarship that relishes in the beauty of the unknowability of the entire world and that continues to wander. This is how we can approach the challenge and beauty of South-South work: going both wide and deep.

References

Ette, Ottmar. 2016. *TransArea: A Literary History of Globalization*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter. https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/25223

Glissant, Édouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation* (1990), translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

'Institut Du Tout-Monde'. n.d. Accessed 18 March 2024. https://www.tout-monde.com/.

Jensen, Joli. 2017. *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moretti, Franco. 2000. "Conjectures on World Literature." *New Left Review* no. 1: 54–68.

Müller, Gesine, and Natasha Ueckmann. 2013. *Kreolisierung revisited*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

Quesada, Sarah. 2022. *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rabke, Sarah. 2017. "Minor Transnationalism." *Global South Studies*, August 17, https://globalsouthstudies.as.virginia.edu/key-concepts/minor-transnationalism.

Russ, Elizabeth Christine, and Elizabeth Christine Russ. 2010. *The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Shih, Shu-Mei. 2013. ‘Comparison as Relation’. In *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, edited by Rita Felski and Susan Friedman, 79–98. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Shih, Shu-Mei. 2015. “World Studies and Relational Comparison.” *PMLA* 130, no. 2: 430–38.

Singh, Julietta. 2018. *Unthinking Mastery. Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

About the Authors

Sophie Esch is Associate Professor of Latin American Literature and Culture and the Director of the new Center of Latin American and Latinx Studies at Rice University in Houston. She received her Ph.D. in Spanish & Portuguese from Tulane University and her Magister in Latin American literature, political science, and North American studies from the Free University of Berlin. She writes and researches the intersection of literature, politics, war, and the environment in the Non-Anglophone Global South. Mexican and Central American literatures and cultures are her primary sites of inquiry. From a transatlantic comparative perspective, literature from Portuguese-speaking Africa constitute a growing secondary field of inquiry. Esch is the author of the award-winning book *Modernity at Gunpoint. Firearms, Politics, and Culture in Mexico and Central America* (2018) and the editor of *Central American Literatures as World Literature* (2023). She is currently writing her second book about multispecies narratives of revolution and war in African and Latin American literature.

How to Cite

Esch, Sophie. March 29, 2025. "Errantry as Method in South-South Scholarship." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Sarah M. Quesada | March 29, 2025

- **Methods:** What does the research process (identifying materials, fieldwork, archival research, and dealing with lack of access to materials, etc.) look like in the context of building connections between Africa and Latin America?

Accessing South-South literary histories requires more than multilingual fluency. Beyond reading practices that engage a fictional text with a colonial treaty, I have turned to reading the interactions of my interlocutors within historically charged spaces, or *sites of memory*. What I will suggest in this brief reflection is that reading texts, archives, and sites together—even if scattered across an Atlantic continuum—can tell stories that unfold beyond the frameworks we are accustomed to. For me, what I will term a “Latin-African” history was only accessible through a series of reading practices and translations that combined the historical, fictional, and spatial. This means that oftentimes my African interlocutors informed readings of some of the most startling moments in Latinx-American fiction, that, on their own, one might just find puzzling. I begin with a short anecdote to illustrate this point.

In 2012, I was researching West African recognition of the Americas along UNESCO's Slave Route in Senegal and Benin for what would become my first book, *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature* (2022). While in Dakar, I stayed with my host, "Madame Diallo" and we discussed the site of memory at Gorée island during a power outage.[1] She mentioned that "Africans from the Americas that come to Gorée are saddened by the site," and something about her countenance, perfectly perceptible over the candlelight, communicated that it troubled her, too. She continued, "it is so sad," and she looked away pensively, remaining quiet for most of our meal together. Diallo's comment about a historical site whose history was detachedly traced in the archive expressed a fleeting moment of affectual relation not properly fulfilled. Diallo's brief moment of South-South recognition, however, is mirrored in connections not always explicitly named in Latinx fiction. For example, the site of Gorée in Senegal pervades Cuban American Achy Obejas's novel *Ruins* (2009), but what might the site mean in that novel beyond its mere signification as a site of memory in the former plantocracy of Cuba? After my fieldwork in Senegal, it occurred to me that perhaps the novel's use of Gorée stood as a textual memorial that intended to recognize Senegal with more particularity than a mere synecdoche. As a site of departure for enslaved peoples to Cuba, Gorée in the novel problematized the easy ways Cubans and Cuban Americans resort to essentialized myths about blackness that deny productive engagement with Africa in its particularity. Subtle though Diallo's or Obejas's utterances may be, these instances in both oral and textual narrative about sites of memory brought me into a Latin-African history previously unknown to me.

An even more startling history of South-South interaction is found in Gabriel García Márquez. While the site of Gorée was not evoked, his gaze fell on enslaved peoples departing from this region. In his novella, *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (1981; *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 1983), the enslaved departed from Senegal never quite arrived to the coast of New Granada or what is today Colombia. Instead, García Márquez memorialized their untimely death, as they drowned in a shipwreck. The quote that has haunted me for over a decade is:"Santiago Nasser pointed to an intermittent light at sea and told us that it was the soul in torment of a slave ship that had sunk with a cargo of blacks from Senegal across from the main harbor mouth at Cartagena de Indias" (2003, 67). It is a subtle but arresting moment that only discloses the tip of the iceberg. The utterance is a historical device which leads to a shipwreck in the French archive shown below (Figure 1).

Figure 1: “Nouveau plan de Cartagène [Colombie] avec les dernières attaques des forts par l’Amiral Vernon” (1741). Archives Nationales, Paris, France.

As I argued in my book, cartographic documents shed light on Cartagena’s naval history, gazing back at Gorée because slaves that departed from the neighboring port perished in the wake of the ship. A flickering presence in García Márquez’s short novel cements Cartagena as a site that gazes back at Senegal because these perished souls—the Senegalese named “*ánimas*” or souls—bestowed the Bay of Souls with its current name.

In this process, spaces of memory placed next to fiction decipher the seemingly odd references to Senegal in García Márquez’s oeuvre and in turn, revealed a historical continuity between the Cuban Revolution and African decolonization. Raquel Ribeiro (2014) and Lanie Millar (2012) were among the first to illuminate the extent to which García Márquez was involved in reconstituting the memory of Cuba’s intervention in Angolan independence. In other words, García Márquez’s Bay of Souls in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* might have just been a synecdoche of Cuba’s daring campaign in Africa: the tip of the iceberg unfolding a Latin-African history during the Cold War. This history includes Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s failed mission in the francophone Congo, Cuba’s intervention in Guinea allied with leader Ahmed Sekou Touré, and the successful defeat of apartheid South African and Portuguese forces in Angola in 1975. Placing physical sites and textual narratives alongside each other revealed flickering moments of transatlantic alliance that ushered us into these lesser-known dimensions of García Márquez’s work and his equally obscured essays “Operación Carlota”

(“Operation Carlota,” 2000) “Angola, un año después: Una nación en la escuela primaria” (Angola, One Year Later: A Nation in Primary School, 2000), and “Los meses de tinieblas—El Che en el Congo” (Months of Darkness—Che in the Congo, 2000)—most of which have yet to be translated into English. In placing the Bay of Souls and Gorée together, colonial archives of Latin-African engagement unfolded into the Cold war era.

For works from the twentieth century, the South-South research process involves putting together narratives, archives, and sites that are perhaps even more scattered than the ones I collected of the colonial period. But by so doing, we find that Latin America and Latinx writers joined forces with African writers during the Cold War era to produce a multilingual literature in support of African decolonization. And here, crucial sites inspired this multilingual exchange: conventions like Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization in Cairo (AAPSO, 1958), the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade (NAM, 1961), and the Tricontinental conference in Havana (1966). These conventions either brought together African and Latin American leaders or produced a platform from which to consider their unity. In 1965, Léopold Senghor remarked that “Afro-Asianism,” as Christopher J. Lee has discussed, “should be extended to Latin America” (qtd. in Lee 2019, xix). At these gatherings, Global South intellectuals and leaders alike reflected on “non-alignment” or how to shape a Third World coalition that was cultural, political, and even economic as an alternative to living under the aegis of white imperialism.[2] These platforms went on to cement the popularity of Third World leaders as well. One of NAM’s masterminds and Egypt’s first prime minister, Gamal Abdel Nasser became a model for decolonization when he nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 and hosted AAPSO in 1957. He posed such a threat to the West, such that the *New York Times* dubbed Fidel Castro the “Caribbean Nasser” in the wake of the Cuban revolution (“From Our Own Correspondent,” 1959).

Attentive to leaders and coalitional sites they built, Latinx-American intellectuals began producing textual narratives in support of African sovereignty. In the U.S., Ghana’s first prime minister Kwame Nkrumah inspired Puerto Rican medic Ana Livia Cordero, whose writing describes how she worked alongside him.[3] García Márquez, for his part, brought visibility to and lionized names like Agostinho Neto, Patrice Lumumba, and Sekou Touré (2000). As calls for Nelson Mandela’s release from life imprisonment entered a fevered pitch, Argentine writer Julio Cortázar participated in the *Art contre/against Apartheid: Les Artistes du monde contre l’apartheid / Artists of the World Against Apartheid* art collective in 1983. It turned into an edited collection that included work by Brazilian writer Jorge Amado and Cuban artist Wifredo Lam. US Nuyorican poet Sandra María Esteves later contributed two poems to the version published by the United Nations, *Art Against Apartheid*, which included a foreword by Alice Walker (1986). This Latin-African literary corpus contains representative names in World Literature, but the nuanced research process that is required to bring their political efforts into focus renders this dimension of their work invisible.

Finally, the Latin-African research process for the twenty-first century reveals an African reciprocity to the Latin American gaze toward Africa. It is as if Madame Diallo’s flickers of American recognition so many years ago become cemented into lasting moments in contemporary African novels set in Latin America. Some of these African novels still address the era of the slave trade reaching out to the Americas: Congolese *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* (2018) by the Congolese Wilfried N’Sondé, or *La Saison de l’ombre* (2013), by

the Cameroonian Léonora Miano's, are just two examples. Others unfold a Latin-African history taking place either during the global sixties or thereafter. Most recently, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *La Plus secrete memoire des hommes* (2012; *The Most Sacred Memory of Men,* 2021), winner of the Prix Goncourt, links the 1960s revolts in Senegal to the violent revolution of the *Cordobazo* in Argentina. Meanwhile, Senegalese Boubacar Boris Diop's Neustadt award-winning novel, *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (2000; *Murambi, The Book of Bones*, 2006) offers a brief sighting of Che Guevara during the 1994 Rwanda genocide of novel's setting (2006, 29). The mention of the Argentine revolutionary is fleeting but conjures the failed Cuban revolution in the Congo described so painfully in Guevara's posthumous memoir *Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria: Congo* (2009). The Togolese writer Sami Tchak's *Hermina* (2003)—a lesser-known novel still untranslated into English or Spanish—on the other hand, reflects on the afterlives of the Cuban Revolution in a novel set in the 1990s. Here, the failures of the Latin American left are overwhelming. Because the island has fallen into an irreparable and sinister femicide, it renders the novel almost unreadable.

As many of these Latin-African works have yet to be translated into languages other than their original, it still stands that a linguistic fluency is paramount to accessing this South-South literary history. However, the frameworks of disciplines that still silo Latin American and African studies remain regardless of a scholars' linguistic capabilities. Marrying reading practices that adapt sites and archives to fiction might not undo conventions that govern African and Latin American literary studies, but they do broaden accessibility to sources that strengthen evidence of South-South engagement. The brief summary above suggests that the archives, oral histories, and sites over and across the Atlantic unfold literary histories previously elided. Indeed, as Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, Mary Louise Pratt, and Stefan Helgesson discuss in this dossier, this South-South connection has a long history of disciplinary engagement. Such a genealogy points to a south-south history requiring more than just *translation*. Even with the advent of new translation technologies or tools that Artificial Intelligence might provide in the twenty-first century, South-South study at once requires a broader framework and models one as we move forward in recovering complex pasts. This is because the research process, like the documentation of Latin-Africa connections, was always already a process of translation and continual cross-cultural negotiation.

References

Artists against Apartheid. Works for Freedom. 1986. Ikon Creativity and Change, special issue no 5-6.

Diop, Boubacar Boris. 2011. *Murambi, le livre des ossements: Roman* (2000). Paris: Zulma.

—–. 2006. *Murambi, the Book of Bones: A Novel* (2000). Translated by Fiona McLaughlin. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

"From Our Own Correspondent: Mixed Reception for Dr. Castro. *Times*, 16 Apr. 1959, p. 12. *The Times Digital Archive*. Accessed 12 July 2023.

García Márquez, Gabriel. 2003. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa

(1983). Vintage.

—-. 2007. *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (1981). México, D.F, Diana.

—-. 2000. *Por La Libre: (1974-1995)*. 2nd ed. Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana.

Guevara, Ernesto Che. 2009. *Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria: Congo* (1998). Querétaro: Editorial Ocean Sur.

Millar, Lanie. 2012. "A Friendship Forged with Blood: Cuban Literature of the Angolan War." *Romance Notes* 52, no. 3: 325-332.

Lee, Christopher J. 2019. *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives.* Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Obejas, Achy. 2009. *Ruins.* New York: Akashic Books.

Pignon-Ernest, Ernest and Antonio Saura. 1983. *Art contre/against apartheid: Les Artistes du monde contre l'apartheid / Artists of the World Against Apartheid*. Paris: Les artists du monde.

Prashad, Vijay. 2007. *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*. New York: The New Press.

Quesada, Sarah M. 2022. *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ribeiro, Raquel. 2014. "The Meaning of Internationalism in Angola: Were the Cubans 'Exporting' the Revolution or Becoming 'the Good Colonizers'?" *Outre-mers* 101, no. 384-385: 267-286.

Sarr, Mohamed Mbougar. 2021. *La Plus secrète mémoire des hommes: Roman*. Paris: Philippe Rey; Dakar: Jimsaan.

—-. 2023. *The Most Secret Memory of Men* (2021). Translated by Lara Vergnaud. New York: Other Press.

Tchak, Sami. 2003. *Hermina: Roman.* Paris: Gallimard.

---

[1] I use this pseudonym to protect the privacy of the interviewee.

[2] For a capacious definition of the "Third World," see Prashad 2007.

[3] See the Digital collection at the Harvard Radcliff Institute. https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library/collections/ana-livia-cordero.

About the Authors

Sarah M. Quesada is a comparatist and Associate Professor of Romance Studies, and of Gender, Sexuality & Feminist Studies at Duke University. She is the author of *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature* (Cambridge UP, December 2022), which received an Honorable Mention for First Book in 2023 from the ModernLanguages Association (MLA). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *PMLA*, *Comparative Literature*, *Small Axe*, *American Quarterly*, *African Studies Review*, among other places. Her research focuses on the South-South engagement of Latinx, Latin American and African studies, mostly regarding literary histories of slavery, internationalism and decolonization. Quesada's second book project investigates different Cold War attachments among Chicana, Mexican, and African writers, and unburies the influences of lesser-known feminists in the Global South. Her work has been supported by the National Humanities Center, the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, among other places, and she is currently the Book Review Editor for the Cambridge *Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* (CUP) and serves on the advisory board of the journal *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* (Duke UP). She has served on Executive Committees for the MLA and the Latin American Studies Association (LASA).

How to Cite

Quesada, Sarah M.. March 29, 2025. "On Sites in South-South Methodologies." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Gilbert Shang Ndi | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa (Latin America-Africa)?
- **Methods:** What does the research process (identifying materials, fieldwork, archival research, and dealing with lack of access to materials, etc.) look like in the context of building connections between Africa and Latin America?

One of the works that I consider particularly influential for a relational reading (Mignolo 2010) of Latin American-African literature is Julio Ortega's *Transatlantic Translations: Dialogues in Latin American Literature* (2006), which offers insightful interpretations of the tense unity between excess and scarcity as the underlying paradox of the African/Latin American condition: "abundance and scarcity mutually interpolate each other, contrasting with each other, as two ways of seeing and interpreting, of translating and evaluating. For Inca Garcilaso [de la Vega], it is clear that loss of meaning, that horizon of lack where native reality is dissolved, must be confronted by its reconstruction" (2006, 13). This text provides in-depth analysis of how this paradoxical reality manifests in narrative/metaphorical framework, character construction, spatial representation, and expressive traits of Latin American (but also, to a great extent, African) literature. In other words, through the politics

and poetics of scarcity and excess, Ortega translates Immanuel Wallerstein's notion of world-systems into narrative frames that allow the critic to combine formalistic interpretation of texts with an inscription of the Global South into the world economy. Though most of Ortega's textual analyses focus on Latin American classics such as Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955), Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's *Cartas reales* (1609), Gabriel García Márquez's *Del amor y otros demonios* (1994; *Of Love and Other Demons,* 1996), etc., the main thrust of his arguments can be related to postcolonial African novels such as the Cameroonian Mongo Beti's *Ville Cruelle* (1953), in which the Indigenous people become beggars in their own land while the colonial authorities exploit the fauna for export. In Jean In Koli Bofane's *Congo Inc.* (2014), meanwhile, the Congo is represented as the topos where such a paradox plays out with tragic consequences in a territory that is amongst the poorest in Africa while its rich subsoil is coveted by regional as well as global powers.

Ortega's method also indirectly provides a critique of magical realism as simply aesthetic effect and rather frames it within an imaginary of abundance/scarcity that is borne out of colonial power relations and a re-imagination of lost tropical Eden as a result of colonial exploitation. As such, Ortega's scarcity/excess paradigm constitutes the literary transcription of a world-system economy where Africa and Latin America have been the major aggregate losers. On the literary plane, this materializes in creative works that represent the subjects of the Global South as being victims of abundance—as I argued in my book, *Memories of Violence in Peru and the Congo: Writing on the Brink* (2022)—and entangled inextricably in a web of economic interests that threaten their agency and capacity to fashion a dignified existence from their natural resources. This perspective is at the very basis of the concept of the "coltan novel," which I analyze in an article of the same name (2022), underlining the irreconcilable co-existence of vitality and the imminence of death at the very core of the tropicality of being.

A second work which I also consider immensely important in shaping my approach to literary production along the Latin America-Africa axis is Adam Lifshey's *Specters of Conquest: Indigenous Absence in Transatlantic Literature* (2010). Lifshey foregrounds the primacy of haunting absence as the premise of any reading of postcolonial literatures. In a manner redolent of Pierre Macherey's assertion that the "text says what it does not say" (1978, 256), Lifshey considers textual production from Latin America and Africa as traces that point to silenced histories, obliterated worldviews, and bodies that even history cannot bury. Postcolonial settings are ghosted spaces of exterminated life, for they are constructed on trails of bodies that have not been accounted for and have not been given proper entombment. Lifshey holds that: "Not all ghosts, even when they gesture of parallel crimes and justice unmet, appear in the same way and form […] their ghosts haunt his colonizing project" (2010, 88). Approached from a spatial perspective, the idea of specters of absence can be applied to the Atlantic, which represents an interrogatory sign of Black memories and an abysmal caesura that African/Afro-diasporic narratives from both sides of the Atlantic attempt to decipher. While the genocidal agenda that accounts for the historical exclusion of Indigenous peoples in most Latin American societies is well documented, the legacies of colonialism in Africa are still being unraveled by younger generations that continue to wrestle with traces of Indigenous knowledge destroyed through colonial policies or displaced to foreign (European) centers of hegemonic knowledge.

In engaging in South-South comparisons, one needs to demonstrate an awareness of the shortcomings of Europe's encounters with the world, whose ruins are still visible. This has several implications for the research process. Firstly, I think that to sample research resources in these two continents in view of a relational analysis, field trips to both spaces are indispensable. This is because most of the texts that end up gaining notoriety are usually those produced either by the respective diasporas or by local authors that have been validated by European or Northern American literary networks. The over-reliance on the diasporic works (partly because those are most likely to be translated) overlooks invaluable but less publicized works produced by Indigenous or otherwise marginalized authors who do not enjoy the same mobility and exposure, but whose works might provide more nuanced representations of these societies.

Secondly, African researchers engaged in Latin American research often limit themselves to the analysis of African connections with Latin American Afro-descendant communities. I think they should look beyond the Afro-descendant frame, given that there exist interesting paradigms of comparability, such as those which embrace Indigenous Andean communities, and provide a more complex and enriching spectrum based on entangled colonialities and their underlying power imaginaries, as argued by Crawford Young (1994). Thirdly, there should be an attempt to identify concepts or non-western forms of conceptualizing in the researched communities or analyzed texts, such that South-South comparison would not lead to the impression of a wild chase for raw materials to be exported and processed by the American- and Europe-based scholars using Western tools of analysis to make meaning of tropical chaos.

Finally, there should never be any expectation of broadly transparent comparable objects of study. Thus, I would rather consider theoretical concepts that look for minimal commensurability (Melas 2007) and *Ansatzpunkt* ["point of attachment"] (Auerbach 1969), favoring a non-conclusive and relational approach to networks and nodes of South-South critical connections. These visions on comparability are what perhaps undergird Mignolo's (2010) leaning towards a relational approach and not necessarily on readily available or neatly defined vectorial lines of equivalence. This approach recognizes the temporal disparities regarding colonial encounters in Africa and Latin America, while at the same time unravelling possible intertextualities and coincidences that might enable subjects from these two spaces to forge intelligible idioms and build alliances in their existential struggles for epistemic freedom and dignity. As Mario Vargas Llosa shows in *El sueño del celta* (2010; *The Dream of the Celt*, 2012), Africa and Latin America constitute intersecting collateral sites of Euro-American imperialism that dismantle the false premises of transcultural encounters on a global scale.

The question of audience of Latin America-Africa comparative work is not very different from the crisis of audience that bedevils academic knowledge in general and literary criticism in particular. Such scholarship ends up circulating amongst peers, with very limited engagement with the public. I think collaborative research and participatory action research permit more equitable stakes in knowledge production and dissemination. To an extent, research on the Global South is still papered along the lines of Benjamin Disraeli's statement (as an opening epigraph in Said's *Orientalism*) that, for the Western intellectual, the "East is a career." What is true for the East, might also be true of a greater part of the South. Most

often, researchers imbued with this mentality engage or collaborate with organic intellectuals from these communities as local informants and not as research partners. This perception and practice need to change so that the two categories (both the Western/Global North scholar and the organic intellectuals) are seen as co-producers of knowledge in ever-evolving and intersecting epistemological landscapes.

There should also be more creative ways of disseminating research through interviews and podcasts, which bring academic knowledge into a trans-disciplinary dialogue with activists, educators, artists, political actors, etc., in spaces beyond the ivory tower, such as public libraries, book fairs, etc. The exigencies of academic institutions condition most researchers to publish exclusively in academic journals. The rigor and painstaking procedures of academic publication have their own merits and have contributed significantly to connecting Global South communities. However, academic publications are not necessarily devoid of the workings of power relations and ideological proclivities. Thus, in addition to rigorous academic publication, I would argue for a more democratic and community-oriented commitment of researchers engaged in South-South studies, both in designing research projects and in the dissemination of research results. This approach acknowledges alternative methods of theory-building and transdisciplinary dialogues. I have been involved in such initiatives based on participatory action with colleagues from Brazil, Germany, Mozambique, and Colombia, some of the results of which can be accessed through the YouTube channel of Djumbaila-America Latina Africa. In doing research in Africa and Latin America, one has to be aware of problematic antecedents regarding the relations that these two spaces have had with each other and with the world. Thus, research does not need to turn the knife in the wound, epistemically speaking, in spaces where inclusion has often been a veneer for subordination and piecemeal exclusion or even elimination. On the contrary, research should carry an ethical and reflexive edge that contributes to establishing new forms of relationalities that build trust and respect.

References

Auerbach, Erich. 1969. “Philology and Weltliteratur,” *Centennial Review* 13 No. 1: (Winter 1969). 1-17.

Bofane, Jean In Koli. 2016. *Congo Inc. Le Testament de Bismark*. Arles : Actes Sud.

Lifshey, Adam. 2010. *Specters of Conquest: Indigenous Absences in Transatlantic Literatures*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Macherey, Pierre.1978. *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966). Translated by G. Wall. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Melas, Natalie. 2007. *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Mignolo, Walter. 2013. “On Comparison: Who is Comparing What and Why?” In *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*., edited by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, [insert page number for this chapter]. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ndi, Gilbert Shang. 2022. “The Coltan Novel: Narrating the Congolese Saga in Contemporary Congolese Fiction.” *L’Erudit franco-espagnol* 14: 56-73.

Ndi, Gilbert Shang. 2022. *Memories of Violence in Peru and the Congo: Writing on the Brink.* London: Routledge.

Ortega, Julio. 2006. *Transatlantic Translations: Dialogues in Latin American Literature.* London: Reaktion Book Ltd.

Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage.

Vargas Llosa, Mario. 2010. *El sueño del celta.* Madrid: Alfaguara.

Young, Crawford. 1994. *The African State in Comparative Perspective.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

About the Authors

Gilbert Shang Ndi is Heisenberg Professor of Comparative Literatures and Cultures, with focus on Africa and Latin America, at the University of Bayreuth, and co-leader of the research projects “Black Atlantic Revisited: African and South American UNESCO-World Heritage Sites” and “Shadowed Spaces of Performative Memory.” He is the author of *State/Society: Narrating Transformations in Selected African* Novels (2017) and *Memories of Violence in Peru and the Congo* (2022), as well as numerous chapters and articles. He has also co-edited the collections *Of Worlds and Artworks - A Relational View on Artistic Practices from Africa and the Diaspora* (2024), *Tracks and Traces of Violence* (2017), *Re-Writing Pasts, Imagining Futures: Critical Explorations of Contemporary African Fiction and Theater* (2017).In addition to his scholarship, Ndi is the author of two creative works: *Letter from America* (2019) and *The Radio, and Other Stories* (2021).

How to Cite

Ndi, Gilbert Shang. March 29, 2025. "More than Ships that Crossed at Night: Africa-Latin America in Relational Research." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Leila Gómez | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa (Latin America-Africa)?
- **Methods:** What does the research process (identifying materials, fieldwork, archival research, and dealing with lack of access to materials, etc.) look like in the context of building connections between Africa and Latin America

I would like to begin by commenting that my research focuses on territorial conflicts and

Indigenous peoples, mainly the role of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in the fight for territory and land issues. This research is inserted into a larger discussion about the coloniality of power, external and internal colonialism, settler colonialism, and the coloniality of gender. I also teach classes on gender, race, and class in global contexts, where indigeneity, colonialism, and the territorial problem in Africa and Latin America are central axes of discussion.

I take as a starting point three authors—there are more, of course—who have contributed significantly to the discussion on coloniality of gender: María Lugones, the Argentine professor who taught at the State University of New York at Binghamton until her death, and her text, "The Coloniality of Gender" (2007; 2016); the Nigerian sociologist, professor at Stony Brook University, New York, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyèwùmí, and *The Invention of Women* (1997), on the absence of a binary gender system in Yoruba society in Nigeria, as well as *African Women and Feminism: Reflections on the Politics of Sisterhood* (2003); and the Argentine anthropologist Rita Segato, in particular her criticism of Oyèwùmí, which is based on her research on the Yoruba, in Brazil. These texts and authors are put into dialogue through my research on the work of Moira Millán, a Mapuche novelist and screenwriter, as well as founder of the Movement of Women and Diversities for the Good Living in Abya Yala (the Americas). What unites all these authors from the global North and South, in Africa and Latin America is their deep reflections on colonialism and how it has impacted the lives of Indigenous women.

There are four important points about these thinkers that I would like to note: first, despite their disagreements, most of them have read each other, and their texts have been translated into multiple languages.

Second, the role that Oyèwùmí's problematization of the Western category of "woman" has played in paving the way for a decolonization of feminisms, which attempted to impose a single hierarchy and gender inequality on all societies and historical periods. Oyèwùmí' puts forth a forceful critique of Western and Global North feminism as a-historical and a-geographic. In *The Invention of Women*, Oyèwùmí maintains that the system of gender oppression that European colonialism imposed on the Yoruba covered all aspects of women's lives, not just reproduction. Oyèwùmí argues that before colonialism in Yoruba society there was no such division of labor according to gender. The anatomically female (anafemale) and the anatomically male (anamale) did not have fixed roles in government or public life. The hierarchical gender system did not exist. The different positions occupied by anafemales or anamales were much more interchangeable and flexible. With the advent of colonialism, the inferiorization of Africans widely extended the inferiorization of anafemales, excluding them from leadership roles, and causing them to lose ownership over land and other important economic domains.

Third, these three thinkers offer a plausible explanation as to why some Indigenous (or African) and white men collaborate to undermine the power of women. Why machismo, abuse, rape and other types of violence are exerted on non-white women by non-white men. Lugones and Millán, for instance, discuss how, with colonial imposition, non-white men were co-opted into the patriarchal roles that the colonial system imposed, disrupting more egalitarian or gynocentric generic systems. Segato reaches a similar conclusion: non-white men were co-opted, but because there already existed a favorable terrain—that is, the possibility for such co-option with a low-intensity patriarchy—prior to colonial intrusion.

Therefore, Segato's main criticism of Oyèwùmí is that although the gender system of the Yorubas was more flexible, the female gender already existed in an unequal distribution of social power. For Oyèwùmí, by contrast, the hierarchical gender system did not exist in Yoruba society before colonization.

However, "in the pre-intrusion world," Segato writes, the construction of masculinity has accompanied humanity throughout the entire time of the species, in what she calls the "patriarchal pre-history of humanity," characterized by a very slow temporality, that is: a longue durée that is confused with evolutionary time (2021, 83). This masculinity is the construction of a subject forced to acquire it as a status:

> On this subject weighs the imperative of having to conduct himself throughout life under the gaze and evaluation of his male peers, testing and reconfirming abilities, aggressiveness, capacity for dominance and collection of the "feminine tribute" This indicates, on the one hand, that the gender exists, but it does so in a different way than in modernity. And on the other hand, when that colonial modernity approaches the gender system of the village, it dangerously modifies it […] capturing and reorganizing them from within, maintaining the appearance of continuity, but transforming the meanings, by introducing an order now governed by different rules […]". (2021, 83)

Indigenous feminist thinkers like Aymaran Julieta Paredes and Maya Q'eqchí-Xinka Lorena Cabnal, meanwhile, speak about "el entronque del patriarcado" (patriarchal juncture), defining it as mixed patriarchy, which is the result of the continuity and combination of the Indigenous ancestral patriarchal systems with the Western Christian patriarchy (Gargallo, 2014). Notwithstanding, other Indigenous women, such as the Mapuche Moira Millán, seem to be aligned with Oyèwùmí, when Millán declares that in the case of the Mapuche world:

> Machismo and patriarchy did not exist; that came with the arrival of the conqueror. People were socially organized according to their *newen* [force/spirit of Earth]. There were (and there are) women who had the *newen* of a Machi (medicine woman) or women who had the *newen* of a Lonko (chief) or Weichafe (warrior), and those same roles were also in the male world, that is, your sex did not determine you to occupy a fixed role; it was your *newen*." (qtd. in Contreras 2017)

Fourth, these authors defend the right to self-determination of Indigenous and African peoples. Oyèwùmí in particular fits into the tradition of African self-determination — personal, cultural, and political — as she clearly states in *African Women and Feminism*:

> However, this very tradition of African self-determination, personal cultural, and political, has been truncated by a series of successive global historical processes. Most notably, the Atlantic slave trade in European colonization over the past five centuries, these developments have made Africa politically, economically and culturally, dependent on Western Europe and North America. As a result, Africa has become the recipient of ideas and goods of dubious, and often harmful value. In order to transform the many types of degradation and dependency that Africans face today, we must be cognizant of this complex history and its enduring effects, as well as the multiple forms of oppression from which African people continue to suffer. (2003, 2)

Segato argues for something similar, in the form of what she calls deliberative autonomy (*autonomía deliberativa*) for communities, or the "village." To achieve autonomy, it is therefore necessary to abandon relativist arguments and the right to difference — that is, to abandon multicultural and neoliberal ideologies — and to replace them with an argument that is based on historical pluralism. (That is what Oyèwùmí is doing: she is arguing for an historical difference). The collective subjects of this plurality of histories are the Indigenous communities — not the state — with deliberative autonomy to produce their own historical process (Segato, 2003b, 74).

Moira Millán has also written about the co-option of non-white men in patriarchal roles, the self-determination of peoples, and in particular the self-determination of Indigenous women to decide their own destiny and that of their children. In this sense, deliberative autonomy and self-determination continue to be an objective that is and must remain in the crosshairs of our discussions. Millán, like Oyèwùmí, perceives white/mestiza feminism as another sort of colonial "tutelaje" (tutelage) in many cases affiliated with multicultural and neoliberal ideologies, that are not rooted in the historical difference of the Mapuche, that's why Millán refuses to call herself a feminist:

> We are not feminists, we are anti-patriarchal and we believe that patriarchal oppression is part of colonization; that is, racism, patriarchy, materialism, anthropocentrism, individualism, capitalism cannot be abstracted; all of that is part of the same colonial package that we are going to get rid of. Therefore, accepting labels and embracing ideologies that do not belong to us is like subtly perpetuating a new colonization. (qtd. in Contreras 2017)

In *African Women and Feminism*, Oyèwùmí expands on the criticism of the colonialist aspect of white feminism: "white feminists have considered their experience of womanhood in their culture as prototypic female experience and have used it to define it" (2003, 4). Oyèwùmí refers in particular to the category of "sisterhood" as a white feminist category for global feminist solidarity that nonetheless does not work for African, Chicana, or other non-white women. Interestingly, Oyèwùmí follows Lugones in her examination of sisterhood as a model for solidarity articulated inside the Western patriarchal nuclear family institution (Lugones 1995; Oyèwùmí 2003, 7). In accordance with Oyèwùmí's argument in *The Invention of Women*, in the traditional Yoruba household, for example, *Omoya* is the first and fundamental source of identification for the child, whereby a child does not initially need to be able to identify the genders of their siblings, but only to identify those siblings (without gender categorization) with whom the child shares the same mother. *Omoya* thus positions the mother in a powerful role in the household and anchors the mother-*Omoya*/children's place in the family. In Oyèwùmí's view, Western sisterhood forges alliances not only against the powerful father but also alliances that separate the sisters from a powerless mother, in contrast to the *Omoya* (2003, 11).

In my readings of Oyèwùmí's and Lugones's work, I have discovered that the two knew and discussed each other's ideas. Moreover, Lugones played a pivotal role at the intersection of Yoruba Studies and Latin American thought on the coloniality of power, opening a dialogue between African and South American thinkers such as Oyèwùmí and Segato. Lugones thus facilitated a conversation between Global South (feminist) scholars and activists, a conversation that is relevant today for understanding and disentangling the multiple

perspectives on feminism, anti-patriarchalism, and coloniality held by Indigenous women of Abya Yala—such as Millán, Paredes, and Cabnal, to name a notable few.

References

Contreras Hernández, Paola. 2017. “Entrevista con Moira Millán Weichafe Mapuche-Pehuenche.” *Desde el Margen*. 27 October 2017. https://desde-elmargen.net/entrevista-con-moira-millan-weichafe-mapuche-pehuenche/.

Gargallo Celentani, Francesca. 2014. *Feminismos desde Abya Yala. Ideas y proposiciones de las mujeres de 607 pueblos en nuestra américa*. México: Editorial Corte y Confección.

Lugones, Maria. 2007. “Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System.” *Hypatia* 22, no. 1: 186-209.

Lugones, Maria & Rosezelle, Pat Alaka. 1995. “Sisterhood and friendship as feminist models.” In *Feminism and Community*, edited by Penny A. Weiss and Marilyn Friedman, 135-45.Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Oyèwùmí, Oyèrónkẹ́. 1997. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

—. 2003. *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Segato, Rita Laura. 2021. “The Factor of Gender in the Yoruba Transnational Religious World” (2000). Serie Antropologia 289. http://dan2.unb.br/images/doc/Serie289empdf.pdf

Segato, Rita Laura, and Pedro Monque. 2021. “Gender and Coloniality: From Low-Intensity Communal Patriarchy to High-Intensity Colonial-Modern Patriarchy.” *Hypatia* 36, no. 4: 781–99.

About the Authors

Leila Gómez is Professor of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She is the author of several books, including *Impossible Domesticity: Travels in Mexico* (Pittsburgh UP, 2021) and *Darwin in Argentina*(Bucknell UP, 2012). She was director of the Latin American and Latinx Studies Center at CU Boulder from 2017 to 2023 and is currently interim director of the Center for Native American and Indigenous Studies. She has received several international and national awards and fellowships, including the Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship for Advanced Researchers (2015). In 2020 and 2022 Gómez received two consecutive US Department of Education Title VI grants to develop the Quechua program at CU Boulder. She is also co-director of a NEH fellowship to develop curriculum in Indigenous languages (Zapotec and Central Quechua). Gomez’s new research focuses on documentaries and films on Indigenous land issues made by Latin American women filmmakers.

How to Cite

Gómez, Leila. March 29, 2025. "Reflections on the Coloniality of Gender: A Conversation in the Global South." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Estefanía Bournot | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa (Latin America-Africa)?
- **Histories:** Were you to write a (pre-?) history of the field, what are the names and texts it would include?
- **Futures:** What do you see as having been key debates in and/or challenges for the field, historically?

Silenced Histories of Resonant Connections

When I was in the final stages of my PhD, I received a vinyl record containing Senegalese music from the 1970s that opened a whole new world for me. It was a carefully curated compilation, which had been recently released by a record label that had taken on the task of recovering analogue recordings from the musical archives across the African continent. On that record, I was surprised to find some classic Caribbean salsa tunes infused with the distinctive sounds of rhythmic electric guitars and enigmatic vocals in a slightly distorted Spanish. Initially, I struggled to place this transfusion of codes. Yet it swiftly piqued my curiosity: why were Senegalese bands of the 1970s interpreting Cuban songs such as “El carretero,” “Guajira ven,” and “Esta China”? How did Cuban music become emblematic of an era in West Africa? In short, how was this sonic connection between two seemingly disconnected regions established? Prior to the widespread globalization of media and the internet, this cultural bond remained far from obvious.

Despite having dedicated years to studying the literature and intellectual history of Latin America, I found myself oblivious to this aspect of a cultural history linking Africa and Latin America centuries after the abolition of the slave trade. In the literature programs I attended in both Latin America and Europe, the cultural contributions of Afro-descendant communities were completely absent from the curriculum. I suspect this exclusion persists in most Spanish-speaking countries, despite the pervasive presence of Black diasporic culture across the Americas. The music that unexpectedly came into my possession illuminated the blind spots within this field—or multiple fields—whose narratives predominantly revolved around “hybrid” and “mestizo” identity constructs, as well as around the complex and dominating relationship with the colonial metropolis. Moreover, the salsa rhythms played in West Africa revealed other avenues of cultural circulation, in which affects, imaginaries, and even political projects were shaped—all of which fell outside the purview of a discipline that is still deeply colonial in its methodologies and scope.

Music was the catalyst that ignited my interest in researching the Pan-African festivals of the 1960s and 1970s. These included The First World Festival of Negro Arts (FESMAN 1966), the

First Pan-African Festival of Algiers (PANAF 1969), Zaïre 1974, or the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 1977). These festivals showcased the talents of Latin American artists such as Gilberto Gil, Elizabeth Cardoso, Celia Cruz, and Fania All Stars band, who performed in cities such as Kinshasa, Algiers, Lagos, and Dakar against the backdrop of post-independence fervor and the emergence of authoritarian regimes.

Amidst Cold War tensions, African diasporic connections were revitalized through cultural diplomacy between Third World countries. This exchange served, in some cases, as a means to align the emergent African nations to the geopolitical expectations of neocolonial powers. In other cases, it functioned as state-directed strategies for solidifying alliances of solidarity in the common struggle against imperialism. Regarding the latter, music emerged as one of the most powerful channels through which alternative global imaginaries circulated and popular resistance manifested.

My first approach to African cultures was therefore not through the "lettered city" (meaning printed textual culture, which was only reserved for a certain elite) but rather through *popular culture*. Festivals, conferences, radio, music clubs: all of these constituted an archive of ephemeral and most often informal encounters that revealed Atlantic undercurrents that went unnoticed in history books. Coming from literary and philological studies, this new topic of study represented for me a challenge and an opportunity to learn from other disciplines. Gradually, I began to alternate readings from the fields of anthropology, history, art, and ethnomusicology. Key works that helped me understand the weight of music as a connecting thread between Africa and Latin America at this point included Richard M. Shain's *Roots in Reverse* (2018), Errol Montes Pizarro's *Más ramas que raíces* (2018), Marissa Moorman's *Intonations* (2008), Bob White's "Congolese Rumba and other cosmopolitanisms" (2002), as well as David Murphy's edited collection on *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966* (2016). These studies underscore the importance of understanding cultural exchanges beyond the traditional focus on elite culture—and written texts—emphasizing dynamic exchanges of popular culture and informal interactions that have shaped historical and contemporary ties across the Atlantic.

(Re)Framing the Atlantic

Driven by a desire to delve deeper into these parallel developments and imaginaries alternate to European modernity, I embarked on my current large-scale research project "Forgotten Routes across the Atlantic," funded by the Austrian Academy of Sciences. As I was researching the historical contexts that gave rise to musical and intellectual collaborations between African and Latin American artists, I came to realize how much of decolonial theory, which pervades contemporary scholarship on the Global South today, can be traced back to the Third Worldist networks of the 1960s and 1970s. This was the period following the Bandung Conference, which marked a key moment for the decentralization of cultural flows. During this era, the very epistemic foundations for the study of history and culture were vigorously challenged.

From the era of decolonization in Asia and Africa, numerous intellectual projects emerged worldwide with an emancipatory spirit that aimed at breaking away from Western-European hegemony and the narrow patterns it imposed, not only in political terms but also in the cultural and philosophical realms. An emerging body of scholarship has been recently

revisiting many of these projects, which sought to forge alternative pathways to knowledge production and exchange. This resurgence underscores the continued relevance of these "transperipheral" routes in contemporary discourse.

For me, personally, the contributions of scholars of cultural studies and art history have been particularly influential in framing my own subject of study. Notable works include Anne Garland Mahler's groundbreaking book on the Tricontinental movement (2018); Christopher J. Lee's edited collection on Bandung (2010); Hakim Adi's history of Pan-Africanism (2018); Okwui Enwezor's history of African liberation movements; Kerry Bystrom, Monica Popescu, and Katherine Zien's edited volume on the cultural Cold War, and Stefan Helgesson's *Decolonisations of Literature: Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945* (2022). All of these titles are great at providing an overall frame for South-South entanglements and engaging with major critical topics of world literature and Global South networks. Yet, I would also like to acknowledge the at times less visible work of scholars and thinkers from the Global South who have developed exciting research paths connecting Africa and Latin America in different realms and historical periods, including Maria Elena Oliva's work on the entanglements between Latin American Indigenist movements and negritude (2014); the fascinating studies of Leda Maria Martins on African oral traditions in Brazil (2021); Washington Santos Nascimento's multiple engagements with South-Atlantic cultural transfers (2018); and art historian Sabrina Moura's work on artistic exchanges between Senegal and Brazil (2015). These studies illuminate some of the intricate intersections of art, literature, religion, and politics, across the Atlantic.

Challenges: Looking Forward and Beyond the Lettered City

The exploration of music as a conduit for transatlantic connections reveals not only the neglected ties between African and Latin American cultures but also the epistemological challenges of studying such links within the confines of traditional academic frameworks. I think it is necessary to interrogate the broader debates and methodological patterns that have shaped the field of South-South cultural studies. How do these transatlantic entanglements disrupt the Eurocentric paradigms that have dominated both the study of history and cultural production? What methodologies can help us excavate and amplify the voices and practices excluded from the "lettered city" and conventional archives?

To address these questions, I turn to Enrique Dussel's notion of "transmodernity," which provides a critical framework for exploring how intercultural dialogues challenge the hierarchies embedded in European modernity. Dussel's work highlights how spaces of popular culture—music, festivals, food, and folklore—serve as powerful sites of resistance and creativity, offering a counterpoint to the dominance of the "lettered city" and the written word. For me, this perspective has been transformative in thinking through the methodological demands of studying ephemeral, informal, and non-elite cultural exchanges, such as those embodied in Pan-African festivals or the transcultural dialogues embedded in African and Latin American music.

In his essay titled "Transmodernity and Interculturality: An Interpretation from the Perspective of Philosophy of Liberation," published in 2005, Dussel highlights two critical historical currents that shaped a new interpretive paradigm. Firstly, Dussel identifies the emergence of dependency theory as pivotal to comprehending the material and economic

asymmetries between core cultures and their peripheries, which had endured colonial oppression (see Frank 1998.) The second current is that of the philosophy of liberation, which Dussel himself contributed to creating and which was highly influential in the 1970s. Interestingly, this movement originated in Africa, as Dussel himself explains: “in 1974, we initiated an intercontinental ‘South-South dialogue’ between thinkers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with our first meeting held in Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) in 1976. These encounters provided us with a new and immediate panorama of the great cultures of humanity” (2012, 33). Such transregional encounters are crucial knots in the history of South-South engagements. What I have found in my research is that conferences and festivals provide invaluable material to examinate transcultural dialogues beyond national borders and center-periphery paradigms, which have largely defined critical understanding of the relation between colonizer and colonized under a particular understanding of modernity. That is why Dussel defines these kinds of dialogues “transmodern,” because they are contemporary to and yet different from European/Western modernity.

My introduction to Dussel’s notion of transmodernity came through the work of Ignacio López Calvo on South-to-South intercultural dialogues between the Luso-Hispanic World and “the Orient” (2012), which was ground-breaking in mapping transpacific and East-West entanglements and networking scholars operating on the fringes of the European core of cultural studies. López-Calvo, drawing on Dussel, emphasizes that transperipheral dialogues should be conceived as “border thinking,” not only between the peripheries of the European core of modernity but also within each national, postcolonial culture. As Dussel explains, “This intercultural dialogue is neither only nor principally a dialogue between cultural apologists that attempt to demonstrate to others the virtues and values of their own culture. It is, above all, a dialogue between a culture’s critical innovators” (2012, 48). This role of “critical innovators” in Latin America was largely played by Black artists and intellectuals who challenged white and mestizo hegemony.

Dussel’s work also directs our attention to the asymmetries and hierarchies that exist within each national culture, which often replicate the colonial paradigms of core and periphery. This results in certain forms of artistic expression not being recognized as “culture,” as well as in certain subjects not being perceived as cultural producers. This explains, for instance, the fact that the impact of African-rooted thought remains marginal in the study of Latin American cultures, just as the transatlantic trajectories that have shaped the work of important Latin American intellectuals and artists including Beatriz Nascimento, Miguel Ángel Asturias, João Cabral de Melo Neto, and Manuel Zapata Olivella remain in the shadows. I believe it is essential to reevaluate and bring these influences to light in order to fully understand the richness and complexity of cultural interactions in the Atlantic context. In my research on cultural diplomacy in the South Atlantic, I have found that the dialogue between Afro-Latin American and African artists and intellectuals was crucial in the processes of Pan-African subjectivation, as well as in the consolidation of political-cultural projects on both sides of the ocean (Bournot 2022).

Dussel’s conception of intercultural dialogue is deeply intertwined with his exploration of cultural liberation, emphasizing popular culture as the enduring expression of the oppressed—those who remain “exterior” to the homogenizing effects of Western modernity. He identifies this “exteriority” as a space of resistance and creativity, preserved in the

cultural moments dismissed by colonial and neocolonial powers: folklore, music, dress, festivals, and the memory of collective struggles. As he explains, “This sector is oppressed in the state system, but maintains its alterity, difference, and freedom” (2012, 36). This insight brings to the forefront a key challenge in Latin America-Africa dialogues: the urgent need to understand cultural production beyond what Angel Rama termed “the lettered city” (1983), which privileges written texts and elite intellectual traditions while marginalizing oral, performative, and popular cultural practices.

To unlock the full potential of this dialogue, we must not only transgress national and linguistic borders but also dismantle the authority of the written word as the primary medium of cultural legitimacy. This requires robust support for Trans-Atlantic field research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and in-person exchanges that create space for voices and practices historically relegated to the margins. These initiatives must confront and dismantle the lingering cultural hierarchies of European modernity, which continue to frame our understanding of intellectual and artistic production. Ultimately, the goal is not simply to recover silenced voices but to amplify their transformative power, allowing them to reshape the epistemic foundations of the field. Only then can the forgotten melodies and untold stories that once nurtured spaces of transmodern imagination resonate anew, challenging us to envision a radically inclusive and decolonized cultural horizon.

References

Adi, Hakim. 2018. *Pan-Africanism: A History*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Bournot, Estefanía. 2022. “*Négritude et Amérique Latine*: From the Black South Atlantic to the Third World.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 59, no. 1: 77-93.

Bystrom, Kerry, Monica Popescu, and Katherine A. Zien, eds. 2021. *The Cultural Cold War and the Global South: Sites of Contest and Communitas*. New York: Routledge.

Carvalho Filho, Silvio A., and Washington Santos Nascimento. 2018. *Intelectuais Das Áfricas.* Campinhas, SP: Pontes Editores.

Dussel, Enrique D. 2012. “Transmodernity and Interculturality: An Interpretation from the Perspective of Philosophy of Liberation.” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 3: 28-59.

Enwezor, Okwui. 2001. “‘The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1995. An Introduction.’” In *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1995*, edited by Okwui Enwezor, 8–11. München: Prestel.

Frank, Andre Gunder. 1998. *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age*. Los

Angeles: University of California Press.

Helgesson, Stefan. 2022. *Decolonisations of Literature: Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Lee, Christopher J., ed. 2010. *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives*. Athens, OH: Ohio University. Press.

López-Calvo, Ignacio, ed. 2007. *Alternative Orientalisms in Latin America and Beyond*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Garland Mahler, Anne. 2018. *From the Tricontinental to the Global South: Race, Radicalism, and Transnational Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Martins, Leda Maria. 2021. *Afrografias da memória: O reinado do Rosário no Jatobá*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva.

Montes-Pizarro, Errol. 2018. *Más ramas que raíces: Diálogos musicales entre el Caribe y el continente africano*. San Juan, PR: Ediciones Callejón.

Moura, Sabrina, ed. 2015. *Panoramas do Sul: Leituras. Perspectivas para outras geografias do pensamento*. São Paulo: Sesc São Paulo e Associação Cultural Videobrasil.

—. 2021. "The Cultural Politics of Négritude and the Debates around the Brazilian Participation in the First World Festival of Negro Arts (Dakar, 1966)." In *New Histories of Art in the Global Postwar Era*, edited by Flavia Frigeri and Kristian Handberg, 164–77. New York: Routledge.

Murphy, David, ed. 2016. *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966: Contexts and Legacies.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Oliva, Maria Elena. 2014. *La negritud, el indianismo y sus intelectuales: Aimé Césaire y Fausto Reinaga*. Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria de Chile.

Rama, Ángel. 1996 [1983]. *The Lettered City*, translated by John Charles Chasteen*.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Shain, Richard M. 2018. *Roots in Reverse: Senegalese Afro-Cuban Music and Tropical Cosmopolitanism*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

White, Bob W. 2002. "Congolese Rumba and Other Cosmopolitanisms." *Cahiers d'études Africaines* 42, no. 168: 663–86.

About the Authors

Estefanía Bournot is an APART-GSK Grant recipient from the Austrian Academy of Sciences and a Visiting Fellow at the Afro-Latin American Research Institute at Harvard University (Spring 2025). Since 2022, she has led the research project "Forgotten Routes across the Atlantic: Cultural Transfers between Africa and Latin America (1960–1990)." Her work focuses on contemporary cultural production from the Global South, with an emphasis on South Atlantic entangled histories, decolonial epistemologies, and political ecologies. She is the author of *Giros topográficos: (Re)Escrituras del espacio en la narrativa latinoamericana del S.XXI* (Potsdam UP, 2022) and several scholarly articles on Latin American and African arts

and literatures. She co-edited the cluster *GeoSemantics* for the online platform *ASAP/Review*, alongside Azucena Castro, and the special issue “The Geological Turn in Latin America” for the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* (JLACS). In addition to her academic research, she has co-organized a variety of academic and public-facing events, including the online conference series *SUR 2024*, on Latin American Artivism, *La Nueva Marea Feminista* (Innsbruck 2021), and the international conference *Decolonising the World Republic of Letters*.

How to Cite

Bournot, Estefanía. March 29, 2025. "Africa and Latin America, Transmodern Dialogues: Beyond the Lettered City." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Jean-Arsène Yao | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa (Latin America-Africa)?
- **Histories:** What do you see as having been key debates in and/or challenges for the field, historically?
- **Futures:** What recent scholarship on Latin America-Africa are you most excited by?
- **Futures:** What do you see as key debates in and/or challenges for the field going forward?

Despite their geographic distance and significant differences, Africa and Latin America often mirror each other, due to their shared histories of European colonization and of the transatlantic slave trade. Whether we are discussing the geopolitics of knowledge or a relationship to history, the challenges facing the postcolonial world are no different on either side of the Atlantic. From the perspective of my training as a historian of the Americas and my work as an African professor of Hispano-American Civilizations at the Félix Houphouët-Boigny University (Ivory Coast), I believe that it is necessary to understand practices, discourses, and strategies of reappropriation as a means for decolonizing imaginaries of Africa and [Latin] America. This position is reflected in my answers to the four questions posed in the framework of this questionnaire.

Histories

The academic work that has most influenced my approach to the study of Latin America and Africa is undoubtedly the body of work produced by Manuel Lucena Salmoral, who was my doctoral thesis supervisor at the University of Alcalá (Spain). Lucena Salmoral is one of the leading Spanish specialists on African slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean. Not only is the topic itself of immense interest, Lucena Salmoral also knew how to use the variety of documents preserved in archives in Spain and the Americas relating to the history of slavery in these geographical areas and, indirectly, in Africa. A topic that also connects to other related concerns, such as captives, trafficking, trade, minorities and marginal classes, emigration, and exile.

The transatlantic triangle of Iberia, Africa, and the Americas, with its traumatic relations

stemming from the so-called “discovery” and colonization of the American continent, as well as the human costs experienced on this side of the Atlantic, is aptly conveyed in his books *Los códigos negros de la América española* (“The Black Codes of Spanish America,” 1996) and *La esclavitud en la América española* (“Slavery in Spanish America,” 2002). Slavery was socially and economically part of the existence and *raison d’être* of the provinces of the Indies. Labor was needed and there were no qualms about the means by which that labor force was acquired, which resulted in the widespread use and development of slavery in the Americas. The expertise Manuel Lucena Salmoral accumulated over almost fifty years is poured into these books, which are undoubtably required reading for specialists on the subject. Here one finds a meticulous reconstruction of historical reality, including the near-unimaginable fortitude of the enslaved, exemplary fighters against adversity and historical subjects whose efforts positively contributed to the development of Spanish and American societies.

But Lucena Salmoral has not been my sole influence. From my encounters with Vicenta Cortés Alonso, another of the foremost Spanish experts on slavery, emerged the book *Esclavos y libertos en los mundos ibéricos: Obra completa de Vicenta Cortés Alonso* (“Slaves and Freedmen in the Iberian Worlds: The Complete Works of Vicenta Cortés Alonso,” 2011), which I edited. *Esclavos y libertos* is a compilation of all Cortés Alonso’s published work, bringing together 26 essays grouped into five chapters, which range from research on the slave trade to the social integration of Black people and their descendants, from the conditions enslaved people faced during the plantocracy to their liberation. In addition to providing a study of the Spanish slave trade since the beginning of the fifteenth century, this book perfectly illustrates the transatlantic triangle (Iberia-Africa-America) and the traumatic relations stemming from the discovery and colonization of the American continent, on both sides of the Atlantic. Beyond supplying transcription of several historical documents and thereby providing specialists in the study of with an indispensable resource for consultation and analysis, this book draws a parallel between the conditions of enslaved Black people in Spain and the Americas.

Likewise, since 2016, working in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair in Afro-Ibero-American Studies at the University of Alcalá and together with colleagues in the Groupe de Recherche et d’Études Latino-américaines (GRELAT), we have organized a colloquium that brings together researchers from different countries and perspectives to work on the confluences and discontinuities between Africa and the Americas, promoting renewed dialogue around these questions. The colloquium takes a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the forms and mechanisms of enslaved peoples’ resistance as well as looking to the new forms of relation that emerged between Africa and the Americas after abolition and onward to the current, global moment.

In terms of the most important debates in the field: it is crucial that we do not forget that Spain occupies the dishonorable last place amongst European countries to abolish the trafficking of Black people. This fact, moreover, requires an analysis of the methods of investigation in this field of study, as well as of the need to identify existing and usable documentary sources.

On the other hand, there is a need for the cross-sectional study of Africa-Latin America that captures the strong socio-historical links between the two regions. Indeed, human and

cultural contact between Africa and the Americas, deriving from the colonial project initiated by Christopher Columbus, has been marked by confluences and discontinuities between the two regions. Nevertheless, as a wide range of scholarship shows, there are convergences around the political, generic, and epistemic questions of domination and resistance: issues that inform the unearthing and rewriting of histories of colonialism and slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. It is therefore crucial to reinforce the work of rigorous critical reexamination of existing biographies and historical archives, especially in Africa. This is fundamentally a matter of knowing how to identify and give an effective account of the various issues that can be read, seen, or heard in cultural discourses and practices in these struggles for the full recognition of African and Afro-descendant citizenship.

Indeed, the colloquium that we organized in 2019 resulted in the proceedings published under the title *Áfricas, Américas y Caribes: Representaciones colectivas cruzadas, siglos XIX-XXI* ("Africas, Americas, and Caribbeans: Crossed Collective Representation from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-First Century"). This edited volume demonstrated that one of the consequences of the so-called "encounter of the two worlds" was that it allowed Afro-descendant diasporas to recognize Africa as the cradle of their ancestors, and therefore as part of the process of construction of national and ethnic historical identity to build a whole new set of opinions, information, values, and beliefs. At the same time, this vision also implies an object-group relationship, resulting in conflicting and even contradictory sociopolitical positionalities. When these positionalities—the scope of which must be rigorously assessed—crystalize in the social imaginary, they have the potential to give rise to collective myths that can mobilize or even subvert a sociopolitical order grounded in Eurocentrism in the Americas and the Caribbean. Yet they can also lead to contradictory positions and confrontations, including between African and Afro-descendant populations.

Finally, I think it is important to point out that the (re)construction of Africa, as much as from within as from its diasporas, should be a place without borders and a space for marvelous re-imagining. The mythification of the mother continent or, conversely, its geopoetic reformulation—particularly through artistic events and/or African or Afro-descendant literary production—should be understood as an alternative space for forging connection. It is a restorative framework as well as a space of refuge for interactions that make it possible to understand the questions of belonging and the practices of legitimation that are tied to these imaginaries. This approach should be in line with the contemporary (re)creation of an inclusive imaginary in which the (re)conceptualization or even the remaking of the self is a necessary precondition for liberation from the specters of coloniality.

Futures

Amongst the contemporary scholarship that most interests me is that which studies the questions of "otherness" and the discourse of alterity in Afro-descendant social movements in Latin America. Research by John Antón Sánchez, in Ecuador, and Santiago Arboleda Quiñonez, in Colombia, highlights Afro-descendant organizations that, through discursive and political action, make possible the representation of these communities in civil society. From this framework, they pose crucial demands for an agenda centered on the recuperation of these communities' history, the recognition of their rights as citizens, and the fight against racism, social exclusion, and poverty. Such studies show that Afro-descendant communities develop their collective action—aimed toward such goals as the protection of their territory

and culture in the face of the climate crisis—through various forms of pressure, demanding that the state respect its guarantees and obligations. While such issues traditionally give rise to studies of a historical and sociological nature, the originality of these scholars' approach is that they focus specifically on the development of unexpected forms or practices rooted in the affirmation of Black identity in places such as Mexico, Ecuador, or Colombia. To do this, they look to many different kinds of cultural production, written as well as spoken, by individuals or groups marginalized or otherwise perceived as a threat. Such scholarship—including work by Santiago Arboleda Quiñonez, in Latin America (*Etnoeducación, etnización afrocolombiana y forcejeos decoloniales* ["Ethno-education, Afro-Colombian Ethnicization, and Decolonial Struggles," 2019]) and by Achille Mbembe, in Africa (*De la postcolonie: Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine* [*On the Postcolony*, 2000])—forms part of decolonial and Southern studies and contributes to the study of ethnic minorities within national groupings as well as of the political mechanisms put in place to guarantee ethnic minorities' legal recognition or equal access to local political resources.

Yet there are also challenges. In the essay "Le long tournant décolonial dans les études africaines: Défis de la réécriture de l'Afrique" ("The Long Decolonial Turn in African Studies: Challenges of Rewriting Africa," 2021), Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni lays out a concern that I fully share. In short, Ndlovu-Gatsheni makes clear the need to full understand the ways in which colonial, nationalist, Marxist, and postcolonial thought—all of which informed and helped to shape African studies—have been absorbed or even disrupted by the decolonial turn. He proposes a decolonial framework grounded in a necessary rethinking of the conceptual bases of African studies as informed by the resurgent and insurgent push for decolonization in the twenty-first century. It is necessary, therefore, to turn critical attention toward the postcolonial social regime, which characterizes the experience of African societies, as well as toward a Western (post)colonial discourse obsessed with the idea of Africa as a peripheral and dependent space. From my perspective, there is an urgent need to develop an endogenous tradition of knowledge production that will allow Africa to break its epistemic dependence and become a source of theories of universal scope. In this sense, Paulin Hountondji in *Les savoirs endogènes: pistes pour une recherche* ("Endogenous Knowledge: Avenues for Research," 2018) shows us the way forward.

Translation from Spanish by Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra and Sarah M. Quesada

References

Arboleda Quiñonez, Santiago. 2019. "Etnoeducación, etnización afrocolombiana y forcejeos decoloniales." *Revista TransVersos* 14: 187–203.

Hountondji, Paulin. 2018. *Les savoirs endogènes : pistes pour une recherche*. Dakar: NENA.

Lucena Salmoral, Manuel. 1996. *Los códigos negros de la América española*. Alcalá: Ediciones UNESCO.

—. 2002. *La esclavitud en la América española*. Universidad de Varsovia: Centro de Estudios

Latinoamericanos.

Mbembe, Achille. 2020. *De la postcolonie : essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*. Paris : La Découverte.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. 2021. "Le long tournant décolonial dans les études africaines. Défis de la réécriture de l'Afrique." *Politique africaine* 161-162: 449-472.

Yao, Jean-Arsène, ed. 2011. *Esclavos y libertos en los mundos ibéricos: Obra completa de Vicenta Cortés Alonso*. Madrid: Mundo Negro.

—, Lavou Zoungbo, Victorien y Mancha San Esteban, Luis. 2020. *Áfricas, Américas y Caribes: Representaciones colectivas cruzadas, siglos XIX-XXI*. Alcalá: Servicio de publicaciones de la Universidad.

About the Authors

Jean-Arsène Yao is originally from the Ivory Coast and holds a Ph.D. in American History from the University of Alcalá and a master's degree in journalism from the Rey Juan Carlos University (Spain). He has conducted ethnohistorical research on enslaved and Afro-descendant populations in archives in Spain, Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay. His main lines of research include the intellectual construction of Argentine identity and the denial of the presence-history of blacks; the ethnohistory of Afro-descendant populations in Latin America; and the places and itineraries of African and Afro-descendant memory in Latin America. He is currently a Professor of Hispano-American Civilization at the Félix Houphouët-Boigny University (Ivory Coast), where he coordinates the Latin American Studies and Research Group. He also leads the research team "Civilization of the Germanic, Hispanic, and Lusophone Worlds" at the doctoral school. He is also director of publication of the Laboratory for the Study of African Migrations (LemAfriQ), a member of the scientific committee of the UNESCO Chair in Afro-Ibero-American Studies (University of Alcalá, Spain) and the research group on studies of Latin American Afrodescended Peoples (University of Perpiñán, France). He is the author of over thirty essays, four books, and has also edited or co-edited another four books, of which *Áfricas, Europas, Américas, Caribes, Asias: Reescrituras de África en el Tout-Monde (Siglos XX-XXI)* (2022) is the most recent.

How to Cite

Yao, Jean-Arsène. March 29, 2025. "Towards a (Re)Writing of Africa and the Americas." *Global South Studies*. Translated by Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra and Sarah M. Quesada Accessed date.

By Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa (Latin America-Africa)?

- **Histories:** Were you to write a (pre-?) history of the field, what are the names and texts it would include?
- **Futures:** What do you see as key debates in and/or challenges for the field going forward?

The present outlook for scholarship that thinks across Latin America and Africa is very exciting. The inaugural LASA/Africa congress in November 2023 is just one indication of institutional recognition for the recent wave of scholarship — often under the heading of frameworks such as Global South studies, Cold War studies, or Afro-Latinx studies, and much of it by scholars included in this dossier — that offers a wide range of models for comparative work between the two regions. The landscape feels very different than when I began my graduate studies in comparative literature almost two decades ago, going in search of examples of how Latin America and Africa might be brought together under the aegis of a discipline whose trajectories still largely ran North-South. This is not to discount the very real challenges that still exist. In U.S. academe, the context in which I was trained and work (although conditions are at least analogous elsewhere), one significant impediment remains that of institutional disciplinary organization, which under the rubric of area studies separates Latin America from Africa as distinct regions of scholarly expertise. Even under the aegis of comparative literature, where many have worked hard to loosen the Eurocentric thinking that long bound the discipline, South-South comparison is often stymied by hiring practices that mirror the organizing logics of area studies and the so-called national literatures.

Such impediments notwithstanding, there are and have long been spaces where comparative work between Latin America and Africa was able to take root. These include Spanish departments which, organized into varying assemblages of “Spanish and Portuguese,” “Spanish, French, and Portuguese,” or “Romance Languages,” have provided an institutional home for scholars working across the southern Atlantic and Caribbean. African and Africana studies programs and departments have also been fertile ground for thinking about the legacies of exchange between the two continents, particularly those rooted in the forced movement of people from the African continent to the Americas. Scholars trained or working at historically Black institutions (HBCUs) in Latin American or Caribbean studies, too, laid the foundations for Afro-Hispanic and, more recently, Afro-Latinx studies.[1] These frameworks are not just precursors; they continue to vitally inform the comparative study of Latin America and Africa.

Yet the institutional locations described above also often put scholars who were building connections between the study of Latin America and of Africa at a remove from the foremost critical paradigm for thinking about the cultures and histories of imperialism in the later decades in the twentieth century: postcolonial studies, which in the U.S. was predominantly housed in English departments. The study of African literature (where separated from African studies as area studies) was largely subsumed into postcolonial studies, while Latin America remained on the margins of that critical paradigm. One notable exception to this estrangement between Latin American and postcolonial studies was Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), which, drawing on postcolonial studies, looked to the intertwined histories of European imperialism in Latin America and Africa as a means for linking the two continents together. Here, attention to the wide range of material histories of connection provided the grounds for the articulation of broader conceptual linkages. In one favorite example, Pratt notes that when the British invaded both

the Río de la Plata and the Cape of Good Hope in 1806, some of the same officers were used in both places (2008, 11-12; 1992, 10). And, later, Pratt's reading of J.M. Coetzee's study of the rhetoric of white settler narratives in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988) informs her analysis of South American intellectuals' selection and adaptation of European perspectives and frameworks in the decades following independence. An early encounter with *Imperial Eyes* in graduate school laid the foundations for my formation as a scholar, and I have been lucky to have Mary as a teacher and interlocutor in the many years since.

But fields are never made of singular examples, and the work of mapping the larger and global history of Latin America-Africa comparison remains unfinished. I have in mind here the sometimes scattered, forestalled, or simply overlooked projects by a range of scholars that nevertheless informed the present dynamism of the field and which, in turn, offer instructive indications for its possible futures. Without attention to this history, scholarship at this comparative juncture risks remaining stuck in an appeal to novelty as its motivating gesture. One of the principal problems with this rhetorical move, however, is that it risks — whether intentionally or not — discounting the work of its predecessors and contributes to the on-going marginalization of scholars working across the southern Atlantic. The latter statement is a provocation, of course, and I cannot properly undertake the kind of synthetic study I have in mind in the scope of this essay. I offer my remarks, instead, as a starting point, drawing on the experience of putting together material for my first book, *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South* (2019).

In beginning my research for that project, I was repeatedly struck by the fact that I was hardly the first to explore comparative connections between literary and critical traditions in Latin America and Africa. Writers themselves, of course, were a crucial point of connection; this was particularly true of writers from the African continent, who read and thought carefully about the work of their Latin American counterparts, as I discuss in *The Dictator Novel*. But scholars, too, had long been thinking about analogous histories of dictatorship on the two continents as the grounds for comparison between Latin America and Africa. Even where their efforts were forestalled, they left behind crucial cues for the directions my own work might take. I will name here two examples of scholars whose work offers distinct models for thinking comparatively between Latin America and Africa: Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda (1944-1991) and Edna Aizenberg (1945-2018). Both were active in the same period that Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* took shape, although neither is as well known — at least outside of their areas of specialization — today. My encounters with Kubayanda and Aizenberg's work not only affirmed the viability of a project comparing literary responses to dictatorship in Latin America and Africa, each offered glimpses of the much wider critical landscape in which such a project might take shape. To highlight their contribution is to claim each as a precursor for Latin America-Africa comparison today, as well as an act of remembrance for two scholars who are no longer with us.

Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda primarily was a scholar of Latin American and Caribbean literatures. Originally from Ghana, he became the first chair of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the Ohio State University (OSU) and also served an associate editor at *Research in African Literatures* (Bjornson and Irele 1992).[2] Rooted in attention to the African diaspora in the Americas, Kubayanda's work emphasizes the continuities between

literary production in Latin America, the Caribbean, and, particularly toward the end of his career, on the African continent. Over the course of a decade, Kubayanda published a variety of articles and essays on Latin American and Caribbean literatures, highlighting the influence of traditions from the African continent in Latin America and the Caribbean, framing this work as part of a necessary move away from "Pan-European," "Euro-American," or "unilinear" systems of analysis (1984 [2002], 113; 1990, xii; 1989, 35; see also 1986 and 1987). Kubayanda 's contributions included the book *The Poet's Africa: Africanness in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire* (1990), as well as a study of literature and dictatorship in progress at the time of his death. While the latter project never saw publication, it did yield a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* on "Dictatorship and Oppression," edited and introduced by Kubayanda (1990), as well as the posthumously published essay "Unfinished Business: Dictatorial Literature of Post-Independence Latin America and Africa" (1997).[3] Working as much with the disjunctures as the analogies between post-independence histories of dictatorship on the two continents, "Unfinished Business"—from which I have borrowed my own title—offers a systematic articulation of the bases for comparison of literary responses to dictatorship. My own work on the topic would not have been possible without the foundations laid by Kubayanda, and his work remains a model for the analysis of the relationship between literature and material historical conditions.

Edna Aizenberg, meanwhile, was a specialist in Latin American Jewish studies and Jorge Luis Borges. Originally from Argentina, she was a professor of Hispanic Studies at Marymount Manhattan College (MMC) for many years.[4] However, Aizenberg was also interested and dedicated time to the study of post-independence African literatures, finding suggestive analogies with Latin American writing. Over the course of a decade, she published a wide range of articles and chapters in this vein in venues such as the Nigerian journal *Okike* (1986 [1984]), *Research in African Literatures* (1990), and *PMLA* (1992), as well as the volume *Approaches to Teaching Achebe's Things Fall Apart* (1991). In an essay on Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), she offers a thorough account of what Mariano Siskind would later call the "material travels" of magical realism as a narrative aesthetic (Aizenberg 1995; Siskind 2014). Aizenberg also reviewed several books for *Research in African Literatures*, including Kubayanda's *The Poet's Africa* (Aizenberg 1992a), and served as editor for a special issue of that journal on "New Voices in African Literature" (1995). Read together, this body of work offers a more abstract model of comparison. Rooted in attention to the same historical linkages between Latin America and Africa that inform Pratt and Kubayanda's work, Aizenberg's analyses privileged the critic's ability to identify morphological similarity or thematic analogy between works produced in distinct political, cultural, and historical contexts. Moving away from immediate questions of continuity, Aizenberg's work explored how ideas developed in the analysis of literature from one region of the world might shape analysis of that from another.

Obituaries for Aizenberg make little mention of her interest in African literatures. An announcement of her passing posted by MMC, for instance, notes that Aizenberg invited Chinua Achebe (then at the nearby Bard College) to speak at the campus in the 1990s but offers no further explanation.[5] Having encountered some of her publications, I became fully aware of the scope of Aizenberg's work in Latin America-Africa comparison by chance. Having completed planned research in the Gabriel García Márquez collection in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, I began browsing the archives of *Research in*

African Literatures. Here, I found correspondence between Aizenberg and the journal's long-time editor, Bernth Lindfors, an exchange that began following Aizenberg's participation in a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar on "Major African Authors" taught by Lindfors in 1985 (see 1984 [1986], 24 n1). In the years following that summer seminar, Lindfors offered Aizenberg lists of suggested readings, critical references, and contact information for possible interlocutors. It was through Lindfors that Aizenberg placed the essay in *Okike*; he solicited her contribution to *Approaches to Teaching Achebe's Things Fall Apart*; and, already in 1985, Lindfors encouraged Aizenberg to develop her interest in Latin America-Africa comparison into a book.[6] The biographical note accompanying the essay published in *PMLA* identifies the piece as part of a forthcoming volume titled *Postcolonial Subversions: The Novel in Latin America and Africa* (Aizenberg 1992, 1235). Much like Kubayanda's book on literature and dictatorship in Latin America and Africa, however, this project does not appear to have come to fruition. For the remainder of her career, Aizenberg (re-)turned her attention to Latin American literature, producing several important volumes in that field.

From this distance, and given the available materials, it is impossible to ascertain why Aizenberg's project on Latin America and Africa might have been abandoned. By this point in her career, Aizenberg had tenure — indeed, Lindfors wrote a letter of support for her tenure case, as mentioned in their correspondence — and, one assumes, the institutional leeway to explore new dimensions in her research.[7] I would like to imagine that the book *could* have been written, but I cannot know why it was not. Rather than speculate, I will say that the work that Aizenberg did leave behind speaks to the value of individual curiosity in the life of a scholar, to the willingness to depart from one's "certified" field, and, particularly in this case, to the value of interpersonal networks as counter to the gravitational force of area distinctions. All are important lessons for the future of Latin America-Africa comparison.

I have given here only a cursory account of Kubayanda and Aizenberg and their work; each a representative sample of the much wider network of precursors for comparative work between Latin American and Africa today. Their examples affirm that scholarship in this vein has long been possible, despite the institutional challenges outlined above. There is much to be learned from their examples, not only in terms of how those institutional challenges might be negotiated, but also by looking to the intersecting conversations that fed such work and might serve to continue the conversation going forward. With that in mind, I close by repeating an earlier proposition: a crucial task for Latin America-Africa comparison going forward is to recover and compile these piecemeal histories, to make these pasts findable, both as an account of the formation of the field and as possible maps for the future. We are hardly pioneers, and that is a good thing.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the staff at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, whose work is vital to preserving the histories to which I refer. In the process of writing this essay, they made available scans of the correspondence between Aizenberg and Lindfors, allowing me to cross-check (and correct) my original research notes.

References:

Aizenberg, Edna. 1986 [1984]. “Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* and Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*: Divided Heroes and Deconstructive Discourse in the Latin American and African Novel.” *Okike: A Journal of New African Writing* 25/26: 10-26.

—. 1989. “*Treading the Ebony Path: Ideology and Violence in Contemporary Afro-Colombian Prose Fiction* by Marvin A. Lewis.” *Research in African Literatures* 20, no. 1: 120-21.

—. 1989a. “*Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America* by Richard L. Jackson.” *Research in African Literatures* 20, no. 2: 316-17.

—. 1990. “Untruths of the Nation: *Petals of Blood* and Fuentes’s *The Death of Artemio Cruz*.” *Research in African Literatures* 21, no. 4: 85-103.

—. 1991. “The Third World Novel as Counterhistory: *Things Fall Apart* and Asturias’s *Men of Maize*.” In *Approaches to Teaching Achebe’s Things Fall Apart*, edited by Bernth Lindfors, 85-90. New York: Modern Language Association of America.

—. 1992. “Historical Subversion and Violence of Representation in García Márquez and Ouologuem.” *PMLA* 107, no. 5: 1235-52.

—. 1992a. “Josaphat B. Kubayanda. *The Poet’s Africa: Africanness in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990.” *Research in African Literatures* 21, no. 1: 216-219.

—. 1994. “*The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* by Antonio Benítez Rojo.” *Research in African Literatures* 25, no. 2: 185-88.

—, ed. 1995. “Special Issue: New Voices in African Literature,” *Research in African Literature* 26, no. 1.

—. 1995. “*The Famished Road*: Magical Realism and the Search for Social Equity.” *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 43: 25-30.

—. 1996. “The Dictator and the Intellectual: Myth as a Socially Symbolic Act in Achebe and Asturias.” In *Eagle on Iroko: Selected Papers from the Chinua Achebe International Symposium, 1990*, edited byEdith Ihekweazu and Chukwuma Azuonye, 507-25. Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books.

Armillas-Tiseyra, Magalí. *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019.

Bjornson, Richard and Abiola Irele. 1992. “Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda: 1944-1991.” *Research in African Literatures* 23, no. 1: 3.

Kubayanda, Josaphat. 1984 [2002]. “Notes on the Impact of African Oral-Traditional Rhetoric on Latin American and Caribbean Writing.” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 3, no. 3: 5-19. (Reprinted in “Special Anniversary Issue: A 20-Year Retrospective.” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 21, no. 1 and 2: 113-120).

—. 1986. “Order and Conflict: *Yo el Supremo* in Light of Rama’s Ciudad letrada Theory.” In *The Historical Novel in Latin America: A Symposium*, edited by Daniel Balderston129-37. Gaithersburg, MD: Ediciones Hispamérica.

—. 1987. “Minority Discourse and the African Collective: Some Examples from Latin American and Caribbean Literature.” *Cultural Critique* 6: 113-30.

—. 1989. “On Discourse of Decolonization in Africa and the Caribbean.” *Dispositio* 14, no. 36/38: 25-37.

—. 1990. *The Poet’s Africa: Africanness in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire*. New York: Greenwood Press.

—, ed. 1990. “Special Issue: Dictatorship and Oppression.” *Research in African Literatures* 21, no. 2.

—. 1990. “Introduction: Dictatorship, Oppression, and New Realism.” *Research in African Literatures* 21, no. 2: 5-11.

—. 1997. “Unfinished Business: Dictatorial Literature of Post-Independence Latin America and Africa.” *Research in African Literatures* 28, no. 4: 38-53.

Luis, William, ed. 2002. “Special Anniversary Issue: A 20-Year Retrospective.” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 21, no. 1 and 2.

Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992 [2008]. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*., second edition. New York: Routledge.

Siskind, Mariano. 2014. *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

---

[1] A case in point is the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, founded at the Afro-Hispanic Institute at Howard University in 1982 under the editorship of Stanley A. Cyrus. The journal later moved to the University of Missouri, where it was housed between Black Studies and Romance Languages. It is now based at Vanderbilt University, in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center. For more information on the journal and the ways in which it has shaped the field, see its twentieth anniversary special issue, which features a selection of key pieces published in the journal in its first two decades (Luis, ed. 2002).

[2] Having earlier studied Romance literatures at the University of London, Westfield College, Kubayanda submitted the dissertation “Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire: A ‘Universalist’ Approach to the Poetics of Africanness in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1929-1961” for his doctoral degree at Washington University in St. Louis in 1981. Today, there is at OSU a research fellowship named in his honor: https://sppo.osu.edu/graduate/research-and-study-abroad-funding.

[3] An obituary for Kubayanda published in *Research in African Literatures* described the

manuscript, titled *Literature and Dictatorship in Latin America and Africa*, as being under contract with the University of Missouri Press, while the posthumous essay stated it was with Howard University Press (Bjornson and Irele 1992; Kubayanda 1997). Although the project was assigned an International Standard Book Number (ISBN 9780882582016), it does not seem to have made it to print.

[4] Like Kubayanda, Aizenberg received her Ph.D. in 1981, in her case from Columbia University with the dissertation "Religious Ideas/Eternal Metaphors: The Jewish Presence in Borges." There is also a research fellowship named in her honor, the Edna Aizenberg Award from the Latin American Jewish Studies Association: https://lajsa.org/edna-aizenberg-research-award/.

[5] See: https://www.mmm.edu/live/news/2662-in-memoriam-dr-edna-aizenberg-emeritus-professor.

[6] Aizenberg to Lindfors, 1 September 1985. Folder: "Aizenberg, Edna," Box 1, Series I. General Correspondence, ca. 1968-1988. Research in African Literatures Records, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

[7] For discussion of Lindfors's letter in support of Aizenberg's tenure case, see Aizenberg to Lindfors, 17 September 1987; Aizenberg to Lindfors, 12 October 1987; Lindfors to Aizenberg, 28 October 1987; Aizenberg to Lindfors, 27 October 1987. Research in African Literatures Records, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

About the Authors

Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra is an associate professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the Pennsylvania State University. Her research centers on Latin American and African literatures, with a focus on large-scale comparative frameworks such as the Global South. She is the author of *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South* (Northwestern University Press, 2019) as well as numerous articles, chapters, and essays. She was a founding member of the forum on the Global South at the Modern Language Association (MLA) (2015-2020) and is co-director of *Global South Studies*. More information on her work can be found at www.magaliarmillastiseyra.com.

How to Cite

Armillas-Tiseyra, Magalí. March 29, 2025. "Unfinished Business: On the Histories (and Futures) of Latin America-Africa Comparison." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Stefan Helgesson | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa (Latin America-Africa)?
- **Methods:** What are the core competencies and methodologies of Latin America-Africa

scholarship?

- **Methods:** What is the role of languages (and translation) in your work, particularly when it comes to working in languages not of European origin?
- **Futures**: What recent scholarship on Latin America-Africa are you most excited by?
- **Futures:** What is (or could be) the relationship of scholarship on Latin America-Africa to other possible South-South comparisons?

To the extent that my work straddles Africa and Latin America, it has always been with Africa as my point of departure. This has strictly personal reasons: Swedish though I may be, I grew up in apartheid South Africa and post-revolutionary Mozambique. Much of my professional orientation as a literary scholar has been shaped by that early bond with the south of the continent. The combination of South Africa *and* Mozambique prefigures, moreover, the comparative conjunction of Africa and Latin America. As I have noted in my work, the distance between those neighboring African countries can be surprisingly great. Besides economic differences and divergent political histories, there is the unavoidable fact of the divide between two formerly colonial languages—English and Portuguese. Portuguese in Mozambique opens the door to a distinctly different set of geo-cultural coordinates compared to South African English. Therefore, contrary to geographical common sense, if you move 500 kilometers east from Johannesburg to Maputo, you will have travelled much closer to Latin America. Imraan Coovadia is one of the few South African writers to have understood this. In his delightful novel, *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* (2012), we encounter a parallel universe where Portuguese is the most prestigious global language, and the highest form of cultural expression is "transport poetry"—the unrivaled center of which is Brazil. Set in Cape Town, the novel constructs in this way a Global South cosmopolitan vision where Mozambique has pride of place as a portal to an alternative cultural world. As one of the Capetonians says about the Mozambican student Antonia: "You should ask her about the difference between here [Cape Town] and Mozambique, how we could be on different continents as far as languages is concerned" (72). Coovadia, along with the J. M. Coetzee of *Summertime* (2009), is a South African exception, however. By contrast, Mozambican writers tend to be well aware of the differences between these two linguistic worlds and what they imply in terms of transnational connections. An amusing example is João Paulo Borges Coelho's *Hinyambaan* (2007), which lampoons the arrogance and ignorance of South Africans visiting Mozambique.

Language, then, has been my point of entry to Latin America. My first ambitious comparative endeavor, *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature* (2009), juxtaposed literary cultures of South Africa (Johannesburg), Mozambique (Maputo), and Angola (Luanda). When working my way through the archives of literary journals and other publications in Maputo and Luanda, it became clear that Brazil—and also Cuba—had been an essential point of orientation for Lusophone African literature in the 1950s and 1960s. Castro Soromenho, the Angolan novelist, spent many years in Brazil. Dissident white Mozambicans such as the film-maker Ruy Guerra emigrated to Brazil. For the great Angolan intellectual Mário Pinto de Andrade, the Iberian Atlantic was a self-evident frame of reference. Brazil loomed ever larger in my own thinking, and it would eventually become necessary for me to take the leap into that cultural realm. My Brazilian turn was also nurtured by my friendship with the Brazilian philosopher Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, who resides in Stockholm. It was her crazy and glorious idea that we translate João Guimarães Rosa's *Primeiras estórias* (1962) into Swedish.

Impossible, of course—but there is a published book, *Förberättelser* (2018), that documents our failure quite enjoyably.

Hence, it was a series of happy accidents rather than a pre-defined intellectual agenda that led me across the South Atlantic and, through my work on the *Transnationalism* book, to my encounter with Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwarz. This was a completely overdetermined "discovery." Not only would it have been hard to miss those two once I engaged with Brazil, but the way they grappled with the problem of literary form and social determination immediately resonated with me. Similar problems had been dealt with in South Africa, but it wasn't until the 1980s that South African critics began to respond to it with the same sophistication as Candido had done already in the 1950s and 1960s. Thanks to the São Paulo intellectuals, in other words, I found a vocabulary for my own reading of Southern African literature—misplaced ideas!—that I hadn't found in Anglophone African criticism.

As with any long-term relationship, however, my understanding of the Brazilian context evolved. It became clear to me that mainstream literary culture in Brazil had been relentlessly Eurocentric in its orientation, even when it sought to vindicate the Brazilian literary field. Disturbingly, Black writers in Brazil long struggled even to be noticed. Race works in different and subtle ways in Brazil (compared to South Africa) that I cannot claim to have fully understood, but what I have seen has alerted me to the prevalence of an anti-Black racism that seldom speaks its name. I continue to hold Candido and Schwarz in high regard, but these days I understand how they themselves were shaped by the peculiar Brazilian racial paradigm which combines exclusionary hierarchization—there are few Black scholars at the University of São Paulo, for example—with nominal conviviality. This realization registers to some extent in my work of intellectual history, *Decolonisations of Literature: Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945* (2022), where I provide an account of the São Paulo "school" of criticism. Through my comparative optic, it became clear that it is not just African literary criticism that can learn from Brazil, but equally the other way around. In fact, I am profoundly grateful for my own anchorage (with all its limitations) in the rich and diverse intellectual traditions of Africa, which I think can be an essential resource for urgent thinking in Latin America today. On my latest visit to Brazil in August 2023, it also became clear to me that these traditions are increasingly being picked up by (mainly) Black writers.

On that note, I must of course acknowledge the pioneering work on African literature done by several Brazilian scholars such as Carmen Lucia Tindó Secco, Benjamin Abdala Júnior, Rita Chaves, and others. Coming from the other side of the Atlantic, the Nigerian Niyi Afolabi was also one of the first scholars to explore the African-diasporic dimensions of Brazilian literature, especially in relation to the Yoruba heritage. Today, if we follow the reasoning in a recent article by Nazir Ahmed Can and Issaka Maïnassara Bano (2023), Brazil—partly thanks to a law passed in 2002 stipulating that schools in Brazil must teach African history and culture—can be described as a center for the transnational reception of African literature. The Brazilian public sphere's relationship with Africa has, in other words, evolved significantly since the 1960s and 1970s, the formative decades of the São Paulo school.

This brings me, then, to the question of what the Africa-Latin America axis can contribute to South-South comparisons more generally. In the Cold War decades, there was a general sense of "tricontinental" solidarity that found expression in various congresses across the world and contributed to the shaping of aspects of African and Latin American literature. We

know much more about this today, thanks to work by Lanie Millar (2019), Monica Popescu (2020), Kerry Bystrom (2018), Sarah Quesada (2022), and others. And still there are many hidden histories to discover. In the immediate post-revolution years in Mozambique, Maputo attracted a large number of ideologically driven activists and "solidarity workers" (the word in Mozambique was *cooperantes*), quite a few of them from Latin America. I have always been aware of this Latin American presence, if vaguely, based on personal memory of those years, but I'm fascinated to see that it has begun to enter the historiography of the region. Desirée de Lemos Azevedo's thesis (2011) on the Brazilian *cooperantes* was path-breaking in that respect, and a recent article by Mario Ayala and Ricardo Pérez Haristoy (2023) focuses on the Chileans and Argentinians—themselves exiles from right-wing dictatorships— who traveled to Mozambique shortly after 1975 to assist in constructing the newly independent nation. The reverse side to this connection is of course the ties that neighboring apartheid South Africa nurtured with the regimes in Argentina and Chile at that time. One of the rare South African literary attempts to account for that aspect of South-South relations is Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1995), where a Pinochet-like Chilean general called "Mr. Smith" looms large. J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009), again, has traces of apartheid-era Latin American connections as well.

Hence, there are certain points in time at which the African-Latin American ties become tighter and denser, presenting singular cases to be added to the broader canvas of South-South relations. If we scale up and think both in terms of deep time and large-scale comparisons, Isabel Hofmeyr has been instrumental in shaping a comparative view from an oceanic perspective—of the Black Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, to be precise. Making the crucial point that trans-oceanic relations on the Indian Ocean had a much longer and more diversified history than the Atlantic, Hofmeyr's "The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean" (2007) enabled a new comparative perspective. In the context of that oceanic turn, I think Africa-Latin America studies has a distinct contribution to make. Following up on Bystrom and Slaughter's seminal volume *The Global South Atlantic* (2018), this oceanic angle will continue to recalibrate the conception of the Black Atlantic and decenter a U.S. American conceptual hegemony. But one would do well to approach Latin America also from the other ocean, the Pacific, to study how histories entangle across the seaboards. Traces of the infamous treaties of Tordesillas and Zaragoza can be found across the southern hemisphere: Portuguese is spoken in East Timor, for example, and there remain memories of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines.[1] In brief, it seems that Africa-Latin America comparison promises to contribute to a revised sense of globality.

But what about method? The skills required to cultivate that alternative sense can be summed up in three words: language, language, and language. And then the rest should follow! I'm simplifying, of course, but the more of a multilingual sensibility scholars develop—including languages originating in the African continent—the more it becomes possible to do justice to the diversity of these histories. I say this as someone whose linguistic range is lamentably narrow, but even from within my limitations, working across languages has alerted me to all the other challenges that come with the concatenation of conflicted histories. Different languages imply different methods and an expansion of what counts as the "archive." Oral history, reading against the grain, cross-cutting fragmented and contradictory archival material: all of this comes into the picture. I could only wish for a second life that allowed me time to follow all these different trails.

References

Ayala, Mario and Ricardo Pérez Haristoy. 2023. “South America’s Trasnational Solidarity with Southern Africa: Chilean and Argentine Exiles as Cooperators in Mozambique, 1976—1986.” *Journal of Global South Studies* 40, no. 2: 418-40.

Azevedo, Desirée de Lemos. 2011. *Os melhores anos de nossas vidas: narrativas, trajetórias e trajetos de exilados brasileiros que se tornaram cooperantes na República Popular de Moçambique*. MA thesis. Campinas: Unicamp.

Behr, Mark. 1995. *The Smell of Apples*. London: Abacus.

Borges Coelho, João Paulo. 2007. *Hinyambaan*. Maputo: Ndjira.

Bystrom, Kerry and Joseph Slaugher, eds. 2018. *The Global South Atlantic*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Can, Nazir Ahmed and Issaka Maïnassara Bano. 2023. “Brazil—A New Republic of African Letters?” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, no 22: 217-31.

Coetzee, J. M. 2009. *Summertime*. London: Harvill Secker.

Coovadia, Imraan. 2012. *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*. Cape Town: Umuzi.

Helgesson, Stefan. 2009. *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature: Modernists, Realists, and the Inequality of Print Culture.* New York: Routledge.

—. 2022. *Decolonisations of Literature: Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Hofmeyr, Isabel. 2007. “The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms of Transnationalism for the Global South—Literary and Cultural Perspectives.” *Social Dynamics* 33, no. 2: 3–32.

Millar, Lanie. 2019. *Forms of Disappointment: Cuban and Angolan Narrative after the Cold War*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Popescu, Monica. 2020. *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rosa, João Guimarães. 1962. *Primeiras estórias*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio editora.

—. 2018. *Förberättelser*. Stockholm: Tranan.

Quesada, Sarah. 2022. *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

---

[1] The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) and the Treaty of Zaragoza (1529) were agreements

between the kings of Spain and Portugal—with Papal approval—to divide the globe along two meridians, with one half “belonging” to Portugal, and the other half “belonging” to Spain. This explains, broadly, the current borders of Brazil, for example.

About the Authors

Stefan Helgesson is professor of English at Stockholm University and a senior research associate in English at Rhodes University. He is an elected member of the Academia Europaea and the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters. His research interests include African literature, Brazilian literature, translation theory, temporality, and world literature methodologies. He is the author of *Decolonisations of Literature: Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945* (2022) and co-author (with Mads Rosendahl Thomsen) of *Literature and the World* (2020). Other works include *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature: Modernists, Realists, and the Inequality of Print Culture* (2009) and the *Handbook of Anglophone World Literatures* (2020), co-edited with Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl. Most recently, he co-edited *Literature and the Work of Universality* (2024), with Alice Duhan, Christina Kullberg and Paul Tenngart.

How to Cite

Helgesson, Stefan. March 29, 2025. "Southern African Roads to Latin America." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Mary Louise Pratt | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa?
- **Histories:** What do you see as having been key debates and/or challenges for the field, historically?
- **Histories:** Were you to write a (pre-) history of the field, what are the names and texts it would include?

In 1999, on the hinge of the millennium, I was invited to South Africa to give some lectures at Cape Town and Rhodes universities. I presented the research I had been lecturing on that year in Brazil, Peru, and Mexico. It was a summary and discussion of the critical retheorizing of modernity that Latin American cultural theorists had been carrying out in the 1990s. My title was something like “Postcoloniality, Modernity, and the Case of the Stolen Kidney: Thoughts on Mobility and Globality.” The stolen kidney referred to a story that for me indexed the emergence of a globalized North-South and South-South imaginary under neoliberalism. In different permutations this story had been circulating literally all over the planet in the 1990s. In most variants, it involves a male traveler somewhere in the Global South who out of a chance encounter, often with a seductive woman, wakes up in a hotel bed somewhere and finds his body has been cut open and one of his kidneys removed to be sold for export to a

wealthy but sick client in the North. I had been fascinated by the mobility of this story, the globality of its reach, and the way it metonymized late capitalism's ruthless extractive energies.

My South African interlocutors were not terribly interested in my thoughts on mobility and globalization in this story nor the already familiar stolen kidneys. They were, however, face more interested in my account of Latin America's vibrant, revisionist debates on modernity. They wanted to know more about Beatriz Sarlo's concept of peripheral modernity (Argentina 1988); Nestor García Canclini's theory of "hybrid cultures" where people "enter and leave modernity" (Mexico 1992); Enrique Dussel's critique of modernity as an "ethnocentric fallacy" (Argentina 1992); Roberto Schwarz's analysis of "ideas out of place" (Brazil 1992); Silviano Santiago's vindication of the "entre-lugar," or "the space between" (Brazil 1996); Fernando Calderón's concept of "tiempos mixtos," or "mixed temporalities" (Bolivia 1988), Guillermo Nugent's theory of "contramodernidad," or "countermodernity" (Peru 1992), and the string of dissatisfied adjectivizations of Latin American modernity as partial, truncated, fragmented, incomplete, insufficient, even inexistent. They too were grappling with the fact that any equation of modernity with decolonization was a self-serving imperial and colonialist myth.

Moreover, people wanted to read my sources. It was heartbreaking for us all to face the fact that they were inaccessible, in large part because they were written in Spanish and Portuguese, and also because, even at the turn of the millennium, it was as difficult to acquire an Argentinian book in Cape Town as to acquire a South African book in Buenos Aires. (You couldn't even get an Argentinian book in Peru, unless some traveler brought it in their suitcase, as visiting lecturers like me were called on to do all the time.) To travel, pages had to pass through the metropole. But it wasn't all just language and logistics.There was no marketplace of ideas where thought from Latin America and thought from South Africa met or sought each other out. My visit did not result in a collection of key essays from the Latin American modernity debates, translated to English and published in SouthAfrica, perhaps as a special issue of a journal or maybe a book. It needed to happen, but it didn't, and maybe it couldn't.

Cold War geopolitics after World War II gave us the concept of the Third World, a term that linked many ex-colonial nation states together both in the minds of First World power brokers and in those nations' own imaginings of a shared struggle against a common capitalist oppressor. National liberation fronts formed everywhere to carry this struggle forward. Imperial languages—French,English, Portuguese—fostered continental and transatlantic solidarities amongst the likes of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah, Samir Amin, and Amílcar Cabral. In First World universities, however, Cold War geopolitics gave rise to Area Studies, a disciplinary project that disaggregated the Third World into strategic geographical regions (Latin America, Africa, East Asia, the Middle East) for which area specialists were needed. In the U.S., the Peace Corps was founded to incubate area specialists and language experts, with a pipeline into the Foreign Service and the CIA. The U.S. State Department made the country's first massive investment in foreign language training, benefiting many literary scholars—including myself. In universities, there was no Third World institutional or intellectual space. Latin America, Africa, East Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia came to inhabit separate centers, departments, programs.The event that motivated this dossier–the 2023 LASA/Africa gathering in Ghana—would have made no

sense in the Area Studies paradigm.

It would have made sense, however, to the competing paradigm: the Marxist-based schools of anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist thought that gave rise in the 1960s and 70s to dependency theory, world systems theory, the critique of development and underdevelopment. Here, thinkers did work and speak across continents and borders. Area studies scholars were reading these materials too. Even in literary studies, where I worked, books like Samir Amin's *Unequal Development* (1973; English 1976), Immanuel Wallerstein's *Modern World System* (1974), Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), Andre Gunder Frank's *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (1969), Kwame Nkrumah's *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1967), and Fernando Enrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto's *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (1970), were required—and thrilling—reading. This literature tied the world, and the Third World, together in the historical experience of capitalism and Euro-imperialism, and in the shared struggle against it. The Cuban Revolution happened in 1959 and fifteen African nations gained independence the following year. Like my peers, I was aligned with that struggle. Though economics departments in the U.S. purged Marxist scholars during the 1950s and 60s, Marxist reading groups devoured their work in other spaces.While this literature is no longer required reading for today's Global South scholars, that 1970s grappling with the idea of global capitalism established and defended the frame in which their work took place.

The regionalized, officially sanctioned Area Studies paradigm was strategic for Cold War geopolitics, but it became counterproductive for the homogenizing ambitions of multinational capitalism that arose toward the end of the century. Neoliberalism sought to impose free trade and extractivist operations that would perform in pretty much the same way everywhere. In the 1980s, the transnational became a key analytical parameter. Big research funders like the Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC) in the U.S. began backing away from Area Studies in favor of transoceanic and transnational research agendas, as anthropology and sociology developed methodologies for the multi-sited research projects that came into fashion, That shift away from the national also nourished the Global South paradigm, which upheld the anti-colonial, Marxist orientation that gave rise to it. The communications revolution—the Internet, the pdf, machine translation, the emergence of English as an academic lingua franca—also changed everything. Pages could travel from just about anywhere to anywhere. Those developments also made the LASA/Africa gathering thinkable and possible. At the same time, the libraries, the research funding, the doctoral fellowships, the travel grants, and international book publishing remains concentrated in Europe and the U.S.

The late 1980s shift to the transnational, the transoceanic, and the multicultural was the context in which *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), a book I completed in 1991, was conceived. At the university where I taught, a new undergraduate International Relations program offered grants for developing courses that went beyond an area focus to study relations between and among nations and regions.They specified comparative studies but specifically relational ones. My colleague Rina Benmayor and I, both trained as comparative literature scholars, saw this as an opportunity to bring a humanistic component into a program centered on political economy. We proposed a course on travel literature that would study westerners writing about their travels in non-Western places, and

the larger geohistorical relationships their travels and writings articulated. It was an opportunity for the two of us to teach a course that conjugated aesthetics and close reading with geopolitics, anti-imperialism, cultural materialism, and the critique of capitalism.

This travel literature course was the most exciting teaching either of us had ever done. We started with Marco Polo's *Travels* (ca. 1300) and ended with Joan Didion's *Salvador* (1983). We read Columbus and the *National Geographic*. We also had new methods to draw on. Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (1976) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977) had been breakthrough books for us, demonstrating new modes of cultural analysis. Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* (1966; *The Order of Things*, 1970), *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969; The Archaeology of Knowledge, 1972), *L'Ordre du discours* (1971, included in the English translation of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1972), and Surveiller et punir (1975; *Discipline and Punish*, 1977) enabled the study of discourse as something far more than just language, and of institutions as discourse machines. And in 1978, along came Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which used Foucault's breakthroughs to study Euro-imperialism's discursive apparatuses in writings by westerners about the non-western world: Close reading with geopolitics built right in. Without quite knowing it, we were living the birth of cultural studies. But it was also in researching the syllabus that I discovered that an alumnus had donated a huge collection of travel books—all signed with his name—to my university's library, and my book project was born. It was not guided by existing scholarship: for on travel writing there was none and the genre had not been an object of scholarly study. New methodologies made the collector's corpus fascinating, legible, and significant in ways that now seemed, at least to me, obvious.

Imperial Eyes combined a North-South with a South-South architecture. It studied Europeans traveling in both Africa and South America; its two geographical axes were those of Euro-imperialism itself. There was no Global South paradigm in 1991, and neither I nor the publishers knew whether there would be a readership for such a book. That readership emerged and grew over the 1990s, and it ended up being geographically diverse and long-lasting. The book was re-edited in 2007, and has been translated into Polish, Korean, and Chinese, as well as Spanish and Portuguese.

This trajectory for *Imperial Eyes* provokes ruminations also on the impasses between postcolonial and Latin American studies. For (Latin)Americanists, the concept of a Global South is fractured by the chronological asynchrony between European colonization of theAmericas, which took place between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and that of Africa and Asia, which took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the Americas, political independence came in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while in Africa and Asia it was a mid-twentieth century phenomenon. Colonial rule in the Americas lasted three centuries; in most of Africa, some decades. For Americanists, the truncated timeframe of postcolonial analysis and its dramatic exclusion of the Americas were deeply frustrating and seemed imperial in themselves. Even more consequential, surely, has been the linguistic aporia: Spanish was not needed to study Africa (or Asia) and postcolonial scholars did not learn it, but it is essential to studying the Americas. Fluency in English was not necessary for scholars in Latin America until the twenty-first century, but it was essential to postcolonial work. South-South scholarship often requires unusual combinations of linguistic competencies (made possible by globally mobile international graduate students

who arrive at their Ph.D. programs with skills in several languages already), and at the same time Global English is a condition of its possibility. So is cyberspace.

As we learn to think planetarily, a much older and deeper fracture becomes relevant: the separation some 200 million years ago between the Afroeurasian land mass and the landmass known as the Americas. Animal and plant life as well as human societies evolved separately in these two gigantic geographies. Human movement connection took place within them but not to any significant degree between them until from the time humans arrived in the Americas twenty-five or thirty thousand years ago, and the European invasion just over 500 years ago. We do not yet know what to make of these distinct ecological and civilizational histories. They underlie the centrality of the concept of Indigeneity in the American imaginary, and its relative lack of purchase in the African one. What scholarly challenges inhabit this contrast, and what can it reveal? When I compare the powerful ecological and geographical imaginations at work in the Kenyan Okwiri Oduor's *Things They Lost* (2022) and the Mexican Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (*Desierto Sonoro*, 2019), and their shared theme of child abandonment, I am ever more curious to see what knowledge-makers and artists on the Africa-Latin-America axis will discover at this uncanny *coyuntura* (conjunction) of unpredictability, urgency, and creativity that is our planetary predicament.

References

Amin, Samir. 1976. *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* (1973). Translated by Brian Pierce. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Calderón, Fernando. 1988. "Identidad y tempos mixtos o cómo pensar la modernidad sin dejar de ser boliviano." In *Imágenes desconocidas: La modernidad en la encrucijada postmoderna*, edited by Fernando Calderón, 25-29. Buenos Aires: CLASCO.

Dussel, Enrique. 1992. *1492: El encubrimiento del Otro: Hacia el origen del "mito de la Modernidad."* Buenos Aires: Docencia.

Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966). Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge, 1970.

—. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language* (1969 and 1971). Translated by, Alan Sheridan. New York: Harper and Row.

—. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon.

García Canclini, Nestor. 1989. *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*. Mexico: Grijalbo.

Gunder Frank Andre. 1970. *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution. Essays on the Development of Underdevelopment and the Immediate Enemy*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Luiselli, Valeria. 2019. *Lost Children Archive.* New York: Knopf.

Nkrumah, Kwame. 1969. *Neo-Colonialism: the Last Stage of Imperialism.* New York: International Publishers.

Oduor, Okwiri. 2022. *Things They Lost*. New York: Scribner.

Nugent, José Guillermo. 1992. *El laberinto de la choeldad*. Lima: Fundación E. Ebert.

Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge. 2ndEdition 2007.

Rodney, Walter. 1972. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Verso.

Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Penguin.

Santiago, Silviano. 1996.“The Course of Literary Modernity in Brazil.” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 5, no. 2: 175-82.

Schwarz, Roberto. 1992. *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, edited by John Gledson. London: Verso.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1974. *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. New York: Academic Press.

Williams, Raymond. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

About the Authors

Mary Louise Pratt is Professor Emerita at New York University, where she taught in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from Stanford University, where she taught for many years. Her research includes work on Latin American Literature and Latin American Studies, literary theory, linguistics, postcolonial studies, feminist and gender studies, anthropology, and cultural studies. Her many publications include *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992; 2nd ed. 2007), a well-known study of the discursive formation of Latin America and Africa in metropolitan travel literature. With the west coast SOFA collective, she co-authored *Women, Culture and Politics in Latin America* (1993). Her most recent book, *Planetary Longings* (Duke UP, 2022) reflects on the millennial pivot from the global to the planetary, through analyses of modernity, neoliberalism, ecocriticism, and contemporary indigenous politics and thought. A collection of her essays in Spanish, *Los imaginarios planetarios* (Madrid: Aluvion), appeared in 2017.

How to Cite

Pratt, Mary Louise. March 29, 2025. "Ruminations on Pre-History." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra | March 29, 2025

Tracking Latin America-Africa Exchanges from the Twentieth Century to the Present

Histories:

- What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa (Latin America-Africa)?
- Were you to write a (pre-?) history of the field, what are the names and texts it would include?
- What do you see as having been key debates in and/or challenges for the field, historically?

Methods:

- What are the core competencies and methodologies of Latin America-Africa scholarship?
- What does the research process (identifying materials, fieldwork, archival research, and dealing with lack of access to materials, etc.) look like in the context of building connections between Africa and Latin America?
- What is the role of languages (and translation) in your work, particularly when it comes to working in languages not of European origin?

Futures:

- What recent scholarship on Latin America-Africa are you most excited by?
- What do you see as key debates in and/or challenges for the field going forward?
- Who is the"audience"for scholarship on Latin America-Africa exchanges, and what is the potential of this work to change the broader conversation(s) in literary studies and the humanities writ large?
- What is (or could be) the relationship of scholarship on Latin America-Africa to other possible South-South comparisons?

About the Authors

Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra is an associate professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the Pennsylvania State University. Her research centers on Latin American and African literatures, with a focus on large-scale comparative frameworks such as the Global South. She is the author of *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South* (Northwestern University Press, 2019) as well as numerous articles, chapters, and essays. She was a founding member of the forum on the Global South at the Modern Language Association (MLA) (2015-2020) and is co-director of *Global South Studies*. More information on her work can be found at www.magaliarmillastiseyra.com.

Sarah M. Quesada is a comparatist and Associate Professor of Romance Studies, and of Gender, Sexuality & Feminist Studies at Duke University. She is the author of *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature* (Cambridge UP, December 2022), which received an Honorable Mention for First Book in 2023 from the ModernLanguages Association (MLA). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *PMLA*, *Comparative Literature*, *Small Axe*, *American Quarterly*, *African Studies Review*, among other places. Her research focuses on the South-South engagement of Latinx, Latin American and African studies, mostly regarding literary histories of slavery, internationalism and decolonization. Quesada's second book project investigates different Cold War attachments among Chicana, Mexican, and African writers, and unburies the influences of lesser-known feminists in the Global South. Her work has been supported by the National Humanities Center, the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, among other places, and she is currently the Book Review Editor for the Cambridge *Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* (CUP) and serves on the advisory board of the journal *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* (Duke UP). She has served on Executive Committees for the MLA and the Latin American Studies Association (LASA).

How to Cite

Armillas-Tiseyra, Magalí. March 29, 2025. "Questionnaire: Sures/Souths/Suls/Suds." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra | March 29, 2025

In 2023, the Latin American Studies Association (LASA)—the world's largest professional association of individuals and institutions dedicated to the study of Latin America—held its first conference in and about Latin America's relationship with the African continent, "África y América Latina: Diálogos y conexiones" (Africa and Latin America: Dialogues and Connections), or simply LASA/África. Hosted at the University of Ghana (Accra) and organized by an international team of scholars, the conference highlighted the long-intertwined histories of the two regions as well as the shared challenges they face in the present and future.[1] If the congress was the first event of its kind since the founding of LASA in 1966, it also pointed back to another important historical conjuncture of the 1960s: the intensification of Latin American and African relations in the wake of decolonization. These relations formed part of a larger turn toward South-South solidarities conditioned by the geopolitical context of the cold war—conversations, debates, and movements that were vital precursors for the Global South as both a concept and project today.

Recent decades have seen the flourishing of a wide range of South-South comparative research and exchange, often under the heading of Global South studies. In this sense, the LASA/África congress built on established momentum, providing a new forum for exchange among the rich networks of scholars working between or across Latin America and Africa. These are scholars scattered across a variety of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences whose comparative orientation has not always been legible under the segmentary logic that governs field specialization and area studies in particular. They are, moreover, just one part of that larger constellation of scholars engaged in South-South comparative work across the many regions that comprise the Global South. This work, as has been noted

elsewhere, has often strained against institutional frameworks, unfolding at the interstices of established fields (see Armillas-Tiseyra and Mahler 2021; Hassan 2013 and 2017). But things are changing, as institutions begin to acknowledge and make more room for the scholarship. Within LASA, for instance, the 2023 congress was one piece of a longer-term effort on the part of this particular professional association to turn attention to Latin America's relationship with other regions of the Global South.[2]

Taking LASA/África 2023 as an opportunity to reflect on the intersections of Latin American and African studies, we organized a roundtable that would tackle the histories, challenges, and possible futures of comparative work between Latin America and Africa. Titled "Sures/Souths/Suls/Suds: Tracking Latin America-Africa Exchanges from the Twentieth Century to the Present," the roundtable brought together a multilingual group of scholars working at varying intersections across the southern Atlantic. In the early stages of planning, we were interested in the tensions that have for decades obscured the rich history of intellectual and cultural encounters between artists and intellectuals in Africa and the Americas—whether rooted in the history of Black internationalism, anticolonialism, Cold War cultural- or geo-politics, Third World solidarities, or other networks—as well as recent examples of exchange that might point in new directions. Principally, we aimed to highlight the many and differing ways in which our colleagues conceived of comparative work between Latin America and Africa.

To that end, we chose the open-ended device of the questionnaire, putting together a series of questions organized around the topic clusters "histories," "methods," and "futures," from which roundtable participants could select a few questions as the starting point for their remarks. The questionnaire, as a genre strongly associated with avant-garde aesthetic and political movements of the early twentieth century from across the globe, is fundamentally different from the other genre strongly associated with this period, the manifesto. While the manifesto aims to be cohesive, declarative, and even prescriptive, the questionnaire is less determinate, open to multiple and differing perspectives, and provides a way for communities to conceptualize themselves relationally (see Cole 2018). This is what we were after in the roundtable we organized for LASA/África. The rich conversation begun in November 2023 became the basis for this dossier, with new interlocutors invited to take part via their own responses to the questionnaire.

The essays included in this dossier attest to the wide range of perspectives, intellectual formations, and critical orientations of scholars working comparatively across Latin America and Africa – discernible from the first in our differing uses of the descriptions "Latin America-Africa," "Latin-Africa," or "Africa-Latin America."[3] Each respondent's engagement with the questionnaire and ensuing reflections are inevitably shaped by their particular disciplinary formation (area studies, literary and cultural studies, history, comparative literature, postcolonial studies, and so on) and the institutional location in which they work, understood as both a matter of department as well as geographic location. Given these differences, the instances of convergence are all the more exciting. Our hope is that the essays gathered here will serve as a starting point not only for further discussion of comparative work between Latin America and Africa but for conversations about South-South comparison more broadly.

The Essays

Given the invitation to self-reflection that cuts across so many of the questions in the "Sures/Souths/Suls/Suds" questionnaire, it is fitting that almost all respondents structured their responses around a meditation on their individual (personal as much as intellectual) trajectories. In the first instance, this impulse gave rise to essays that provide some historical perspective on comparative work between Latin America and Africa. Here, Mary Louise Pratt tracks the development of the competing paradigms that emerged in the cold war period and transformed toward the turn of the present century, as the background against which her work on projects such as *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) unfolded. Stefan Helgesson traces his own trajectory across southern Africa to Brazil, via the Lusophone axis, illuminating how the coincidences that shape the trajectory of our lives can inform our work as scholars. And Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra turns toward questions of field genealogy, looking back to earlier examples of scholars doing comparative work between Latin American and African literatures as part of a necessary history of the field, which remains to be fully written.

In the second instance, respondents' personal reflections illuminate the many different disciplinary registers on which Latin America-Africa comparison might draw. Trained as a historian of the Atlantic world in Spain, Jean-Arsène Yao highlights the importance of the large body of scholarship on the history and legacies of transatlantic slavery for Latin America-Africa studies today. Drawing on the experience of first encountering Senegalese reinterpretations of classic Cuban songs, Estefanía Bournot argues for the importance of looking beyond the "lettered city" to the myriad forms of popular culture in which the legacies of the long history of exchange between the two regions can be found. Leila Gómez, meanwhile, turns attention to feminist thought and philosophy, tracking conversations about the coloniality of gender back and forth across the Atlantic.

In the third instance, respondent's accounts of their own trajectories crystallize a series of reflections on questions of method. Here, Gilbert Shang Ndi argues for models of relational research that go beyond the immediate material connections between the two continents (e.g. a focus on Afro-descendant communities in Latin America) but are nonetheless firmly grounded in interaction with and respect for the communities studied; a commitment that includes disseminating work to a wider audience. Sarah Quesada, proposes site-reading while wandering as a methodology that serves to illuminate origin stories of South-South interactions that cannot always be archived in or transmitted by written form, thereby filling the epistemic gaps produced when sources are not reliable or available. In conversation with Quesada is Sophie Esch, whose image of "wandering" proposes a methodological *errantry* – a concept drawn from the work of Édouard Glissant – necessarily supplemented by humility as guiding principles for South-South scholarship. Like Esch, Lanie Millar also turns to the work of Glissant, arguing against the disciplinary imperative to "master" or "dominate" one's subject. Instead, Millar – like many in this dossier – opt for an ethics of humility open to collaboration, acknowledging our dependence on the expertise of others. The aim of this dossier is thus a similar one: to propose working in and with a community, regardless of physical or geographical distance. The future for South-South comparative work across Latin America, Africa, and beyond is exciting and our hope is that this dossier will help to facilitate its unfolding.

References

Armillas-Tiseyra, Magalí and Anne Garland Mahler. 2021. “Introduction: New Critical Directions in Global South Studies.” *CLS: Comparative Literature Studies* 58 (3): 465-84.

Cole, Lori. 2018. *Surveying the Avant Garde: Questions on modernism, Art, and the Americas in Transatlantic Magazines*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Hassan, Waïl. 2013. “Which Languages?” *Comparative Literature* 65 (1): 5–14.

—. 2017. “Arabic and the Paradigms of Comparison.” In *Futures of Comparative Literature*, edited by Ursula K. Heis et al., 187-94. New York: Routledge.

Quesada, Sarah M. 2022. *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. Cambridge University Press.

—. 2024. “Latin-Africa.” Keywords for Postcolonial Thought. *Post 45.* September 17. https://post45.org/2024/09/latin-africa/

---

[1] For more information on LASA/África 2023, see: https://africa.lasaweb.org/en/.

[2] In 2022, LASA held a virtual LASA/Asia conference titled “Rethinking Trans-Pacific Ties: Asia and Latin America” (https://asia.lasaweb.org/en/). Building on the momentum of these conferences, the association now has sections dedicated to “Asia and the Americas” and “Africa and the Americas,” the latter co-chaired by Mara Viveros Vigoya (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) and Joanna Boampong (University of Ghana). While, as of writing, there is not an equivalent section dedicated to Latin America and the Middle East in LASA, its quarterly newsletter, *LASA Forum* regularly features material on the relationship between the two regions, including a dossier (“Debates”) on Latin America and the Middle East (47.1; 2016).

[3] For a definition of “Latin-Africa” as a concept, see Quesada (2022, 2024).

About the Authors

Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra is an associate professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the Pennsylvania State University. Her research centers on Latin American and African literatures, with a focus on large-scale comparative frameworks such as the Global South. She is the author of *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South* (Northwestern University Press, 2019) as well as numerous articles, chapters, and essays. She was a founding member of the forum on the Global South at the Modern Language Association (MLA) (2015-2020) and is co-director of *Global South Studies*. More information on her work can be found at www.magaliarmillastiseyra.com.

Sarah M. Quesada is a comparatist and Associate Professor of Romance Studies, and of Gender, Sexuality & Feminist Studies at Duke University. She is the author of *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature* (Cambridge UP, December 2022), which received an Honorable Mention for First Book in 2023 from the ModernLanguages Association (MLA). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *PMLA*, *Comparative Literature*, *Small Axe*, *American Quarterly*, *African Studies Review*, among other places. Her research focuses on the South-South engagement of Latinx, Latin American and African studies, mostly regarding literary histories of slavery, internationalism and decolonization. Quesada's second book project investigates different Cold War attachments among Chicana, Mexican, and African writers, and unburies the influences of lesser-known feminists in the Global South. Her work has been supported by the National Humanities Center, the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, among other places, and she is currently the Book Review Editor for the Cambridge *Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* (CUP) and serves on the advisory board of the journal *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* (Duke UP). She has served on Executive Committees for the MLA and the Latin American Studies Association (LASA).

How to Cite

Armillas-Tiseyra, Magalí. March 29, 2025. "Introduction: South-South Constellations, Latin America and Africa." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By J. Daniel Elam | May 19, 2023

In April 1959, the University of Wisconsin-Madison hosted one of the first conferences on world literature after World War II, though it was hardly among the first wave of conferences after World War II that focused on world literature. In other words, the implicit claim of the conference was that "world literature after World War II" named a new intellectual project, only superficially related to the various previous projects dubbed "world literature" (Block 1960).

The title of the conference – "The Teaching of World Literature" – reveals the basis of the revised endeavour: world literature was now pedagogical, not philological. Investigations into the philology of world literature were possible in the comparative literature departments of elite, private, and coastal American universities. Public universities, and especially those disproportionately tasked with the mission to democratize higher education, needed to articulate the pedagogical vision, value, and methods of world literature after World War II.

Unlike Columbia's Great Books or Harvard's Classics, World Literature was charged with the mission of introducing middle-class Americans to a world they could likely never afford to visit. The accuracy of its representation of foreign and exotic lands was secondary to the cultivation of an affective and sentimental cosmopolitanism. In the wake of World War II, the stakes were high. Cosmopolitan sympathy from partial knowledge warded off two much more disastrous options: xenophobic isolationism at one end and omniscient *Realpolitik* at the other.

Werner Friederich, a professor from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, opens the

conference with what we now might associate with the standard criticisms: every text will need to be in English translation; no course could honestly claim to cover the "world" of literature; anthologies of world literature would reproduce global hierarchies; and the implicit claim that a literature of a culture represents its inherent spirit is quaint at best. Stuck between the rigor of comparative literature and the dilettantism of a university freshman, world literature was doomed to occupy the undergraduate survey/service course.

For Friederich (the co-founder, in 1949, of the journal *Comparative Literature*) it is the shameful insufficiency of world literature that makes it a necessary part of the post-World War II public university curriculum. The catalogue of inadequacies reveals the basis for world literature's "integrity." And no better place for such a project than the US, whose history of migration and multiculturalism posed significant problems to hobbling together a "national literature"; and whose universities had been recently staffed by exiles from European fascism. The determinedly dilettantish design of "world literature" was necessary to counteract the doggedly dogmatic demand for expertise required by area studies: better to read and appreciate Confucius in English translation than to mine him for political tactics in the original Chinese.

Anticolonial Burnout

Insufficiency and urgency – or impossibility and necessity – are the critical conditions of revolutionary anticolonialism in *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth.* It is absolutely urgent to act on behalf of a world without colonialism, but without regard to rubrics of sufficiency, success, or mastery. Anticolonial politics is an art of the impossible, which makes it all the more necessary for those whose lives will most likely end before the colonial world does. My book is doggedly recalcitrant: it takes two deeply nationalist projects – *Weltliteratur* and anticolonialism – and refuses their nationalism. It reads manifestos as tentative and academic scholarship as inexpert. The book charts the frenetic pessimistic utopianism of a firecracker.

This is not the same type of urgency, necessity, insufficiency, and impossibility we see at Madison in 1959. There is certainly excitement (with equal parts anxiety) around the democratisation of the American university, catalysed by the GI Bill in 1944. Unlike previous projects of world literature – energized by imagining literature conducive for a world after totalitarianism – "The Teaching of World Literature" is the task that remains in a world which, for some reason, insists on existing after nominal and partial defeat of fascism and colonialism. The thinkers and critics that populate the pages of *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* race headfirst into the impossibility of their projects. The critics that attend the 1959 UW-Madison conference slouch towards the necessity of theirs: there was poetry after Auschwitz, and a growing student body to learn it.

If Comparative Literaturewas a *Lonely Planet* guide, World Literature after World War II was *Eat, Pray, Love.* The former tells you how to navigate a brand-new world as it unfolds before you, the latter recounts a route of reconstruction after compromise and catastrophe. "The Teaching of World Literature" and *Eat, Pray, Love* both sit at the porous boundaries between despair and hope, between expertise and dilettantism, between elite prudence and mass-market indulgence, between rationality and sentimentality. But most importantly, the two texts share a particular combination of pathos and pragmatism necessary for self-cultivation

and worldmaking (in under a year and on a predetermined budget) after devastation.

Postcolonial state-building in the mid-twentieth century required a similar combination of pathos and pragmatism. The world that anticolonial activism brought into existence only vaguely resembled the world it had endeavoured to create; national independence was the bare minimum of anticolonialism's demands. The great decolonial wave that swelled across the Global South left newly independent countries beached on the shores of the Cold War. For Fanon, the post-independence world was no less "Manichean" than the colonial world. History repeated itself, first as empires, then as blocs.

Decolonial Tedium

The nominally successful revolutions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, much like the two centuries' victorious wars and battles, produced a world whose distance from utopia could be measured not by its insufficiency but rather by its mere sufficiency. Our pessimistic commitment to the nominal success of anticolonial and anti-fascist causes reveals itself to be merely the nominal failure of one iteration of colonialism and fascism. B.R. Ambedkar drafted a utopian constitution for India and despaired as it was dismantled clause by clause. Theodor Adorno's minimal ethics, and Victor Klemperer's philology chronicled what it was like not only to live after Third Reich but what it felt like to live after the end of the world itself.[1] In 2023 there are few remaining signs of the possible revolutions of our times. An artist in Hong Kong painted two hundred portraits of birds killed by teargas in 2019. An artist in Beirut created hundreds of vases out of the broken glass that covered the city in August 2020. In Tehran, the protesters have persisted – almost enough to give cause for optimism. But like the mid-twentieth-century decolonial movements, even the most successful revolutions involve catastrophe and heartbreak. And boredom: what is there to do after a revolution, a student recently asked me, besides watch television?

Perhaps he could read *Eat, Pray, Love*. Adorno's *Minima Moralia* is about being personally heartbroken in the wake of global catastrophe; *Eat, Pray, Love* is about being globally heartbroken in the wake of personal catastrophe (Gilbert 2006). World Literature after World War II, much like independence after colonialism, is both. We might trace a major strain of post-independence political theory which tries to reconcile a cautious optimism with catastrophe and heartbreak, tinged with disappointment with the tedium that accompanies ostensible anticolonial success. The independence of the Third World was cheapened – or entirely undermined – by the cruelty of international debt and global antipathy. The democratic promises of the GI Bill were cheapened – or entirely undermined – by the ultimate inflexible exclusivity of the American university.

What I am attempting to trace here is a hazy outline of affects that form the basis of comparative literature and postcolonial thought – distinct from the contours of the projects of philology and anticolonial thought that I attempted to describe in *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth*. The project of world-making after empire, and world-lit-making after fascism, is nearly debilitated by paradoxic forces: the necessary dilettantism and pragmatic tedium required to build a nation from scratch; the naïve optimism and wary scepticism that a vision for egalitarianism demands; and a disillusioned intractability necessary for facing the Cold War world.

Take, for example, Kwame Nkrumah's speech on Ghanian independence, in 1957, or Jawaharlal Nehru's speech on Indian independence a decade earlier.[2] After the trysts and battles comes "incessant striving," not unconditional freedom. The optimism of Nehru's and Nkrumah's speeches are overshadowed by the necessity of "hard work" – a phrase that tempers "the new age" and "the new Africa" the orations otherwise occasion. The utopia envisioned by anticolonialism became a freedom to-be-accrued, not-yet-accrued.

After the empire stopped "stretching the tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of empire" (in Benedict Anderson's memorable phrase), post-independence political leaders had to figure out what to do with all those ungainly folds that the bunched-up, stretched skin left behind (to paraphrase Isabel Hofmeyr's brilliant response) (Anderson 1981; Hofmeyr 2014). The project of teaching World Literature, similarly, was trying to figure out exactly what to do with the same burden. Despite their shared vision for a *world*, both postcolonial thinkers and world literature professors found themselves stuck with the intransigent unit of the 'nation.'

The cosmopolitan egalitarianism promised by the conjoined missions of the GI Bill and World Literature curricula relied upon university reading. The paradox that Omid, Ramsey, and Dilip brilliantly identify in different ways in this collection – that reading is simultaneously an invitation to egalitarianism and an initiation into hierarchical systems – is a paradox that continues to undergird the institution of academia. The university it has produced can promise neither egalitarianism nor exclusivity.

Many post-independence political thinkers continued to imagine political communities beyond the nation, even as they realised the nation was the only political community the First and Second Worlds would recognise. Consequently, many of the same post-independence political thinkers simultaneously relied on the dangerous sentimentality of nationalism. But the egalitarianism proffered by the nation-state relied on the exclusivity of nationalist protectionism. The nation-states this alliance has produced (much like the nation-states it sought to replicate) offers neither egalitarianism nor protection. (Unlike the university, it doesn't pretend to.)

Postcolonial Middlebrow

In other words: "around 1948" there seems to be a decisive, if not radical, shift in the definition of, and approach to egalitarianism, in aesthetic and political theory (Gandhi and Nelson 2014). Visions for egalitarianism don't disappear in the 1950s, but they start to look like fun-house-mirror versions of their previous incarnations. In his essay, Ramsey draws our attention to Fanon's drearily correct prediction: the decolonised world might only be "a society of individuals… whose only wealth is individual thought." In the guise of raising everyone up, the equalising force propelled the world down. Anglophone education in the British Raj aspired to create "mimic men," the menacing class of the imperial world. Anglophone world literature education in post-war American universities aspired to create "mimic men," the managerial class of the corporate world. Impossible ethical schemes have become impossible Excel spreadsheets.

My goal here is not to malign post-imperial world-making or post-war world literature, but rather to inventory its restraints and constitutive disappointments. What are the politics and aesthetics conducive for a world produced by revolutions whose demands were only

superficially met? How do we account for the diminished utopianism of a sort-of-maybe-technically-speaking postcolonial or post-fascist world? What forms of political belonging are available to those living in the uncharted abyss between the world we wanted and the world we got? What does critique look like in a world only partly altered by the revolution of our times? What isthe *World Literature for the Men in the Grey Flannel Suits*?

Allow me to humbly propose, then, the following: mid-twentieth-century post-independence political thought, like contemporaneous world literature pedagogy, is middlebrow critique. It is no longer utopian, but aspirational. It longs for the optimism of a resuscitated past while stuck in debt *ad infinitum*. Freedom has become an investment whose return we will likely not see. Nation-building requires a Protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism. If Auerbach's philology imagined an egalitarian world for friends who won't live to see it, "The Teaching of World Literature" imagines an egalitarian world for students who can't afford to see it.

Eat, Pray, Love offers the clearest articulation of this altered worldview, which is worth quoting in full:

> I was beginning to sense that – even though my life still looked like a multivehicle accident on the New Jersey turnpike during holiday traffic – I was tottering on the brink of becoming a self-governing individual. When I wasn't feeling suicidal about my divorce, or suicidal about my drama with David, I was actually feeling kind of delighted about all the compartments of time and space that were appearing in my days, during which I could ask myself the radical new question: 'What do *you* want to do, Liz?' (Gilbert 2006, 36)

This is a stunning encapsulation of European liberal political theory in the age of its post-imperial decay. As the British and French maliciously discarded their imperial holdings, new nations found themselves tottering on the brink of becoming self-governing, oscillating between self-destruction and self-determination.

Postcolonial theory is undoubtedly the benefactor of anticolonial thought, but to imagine it as a proper bequeathing is, at best, romanticising its trajectory. The form it takes is more like a cheap promissory note rather than a formal inheritance. To imagine critique in a world after the formal end of European empires requires us to reconcile our celebration of decolonialisation with our dour (and correct) insistence that empires live long after their formal ends. Middlebrow postcolonial theory – much like the middlebrow pedagogical project of World Literature – is a makeshift egalitarianism for the world still "in the meantime," stuck on the New Jersey turnpike on the way to its holiday utopia.

References

Ambedkar, B. R. *The Collected Works of B.R. Ambedkar.* Maharashtrian State Archives.

Anderson, Benedict. 1981. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso Press.

Adorno, Theodor. (1951) 2020. *Minima Moralia.* London: Verso Press.

Block, Haskell, ed. 1960. *The Teaching of World Literature: Proceedings of the Conference at the University of Wisconsin, April 24-25, 1959*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Gandhi, Leela, and Deborah Nelson, eds. 2014. "Around 1948." *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 4 (Summer).

Gilbert, Elizabeth. 2006. *Eat, Pray, Love.* New York: Penguin.

Hofmeyr, Isabel. 2014. *Gandhi's Printing Press.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Klemperer, Victor. (1947) 2020. *Language of the Third Reich (Lingua Tertii Imperii)*. London: Continuum Press.

Nehru, Jawaharlal. "Independence Day Speech." Last accessed 13 May 2023. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/125396/1154_trystnehru.pdf.

Nkrumah, Kwame. "Independence Day Speech." Last accessed 13 May 2023. https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Your-country-is-free-forever-Kwame-Nkrumah-s-famous-Independence-Day-speech-782738.

Acknowledgments

It is a central argument of my book that readers can be revolutionarily generous colleagues and friends, but the book's readers have made that argument newly compelling in ways that far exceed what I had imagined. I am grateful to the contributors in this forum for giving the book a more capacious, exciting, and imaginative scope than it has on its own. Every essay in this forum benefited from the editorial precision and insight of Anne Garland Mahler, Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, and Leigh Anne Duck. Michael Allen, Akshya Saxena, Sunayani Bhattacharya, Kritish Rajbhandari, and John McGowan read *Eat, Pray, Love* with me. It is a special privilege to know such brilliant people and I am perpetually thrilled to think, speak, and write with them.

---

[1] See *The Collected Works of B.R. Ambedkar* published by the Maharashtrian State Archives; Adorno [1951] 2020; Klemperer [1947] 2020.

[2] Nkrumah, Kwame. "Independence Day Speech" (accessible at: https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Your-country-is-free-forever-Kwame-Nkrumah-s-famous-Independence-Day-speech-782738); Nehru, Jawaharlal. "Independence Day Speech" (accessible at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/125396/1154_trystnehru.pdf)

About the Authors

J. Daniel Elam is assistant professor of comparative literature at the University of Hong Kong. He is the author of *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* (Fordham University

Press, 2020).

How to Cite

Elam, J. Daniel. May 19, 2023. "What Do You Do After Revolution?." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Ramsey McGlazer | May 19, 2023

There is a phrase I overuse. It's "master class." Too often, I'll trot it out to praise a friend's essay in progress or to show appreciation for a passage I'm teaching. "This paragraph is a master class," I'll say, in class, of a virtuosic reading by Erich Auerbach. Or I'll write in a review, in an effort to convey my sense of an author's rhetorical gifts: "The introduction is a master class."

Reading J. Daniel Elam's *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* made me want to give up the phrase for good. Or rather, Elam's book taught me to ask a series of questions about what it would mean to take distance from the figure of the master and the fantasy of mastery. What is teaching when it's not a performance of expertise or an exercise of authority? How can we "stop and leave" our current Master Classes (118)? How, conditioned as we are to value mastery, can we unlearn the imperative and the impulse to deliver such classes, to demonstrate what we know, whether to "prove" or simply to share it? And what should we do with our ingrained — perhaps inevitable — admiration for the virtuosos in our lives? Are there times when it's worth distinguishing between two forms of mastery, aesthetic and political, or between expertise, on the one hand, and domination, on the other?

To ask these last questions is implicitly to identify a tension sustained throughout Elam's study, which is a virtuosic critique of virtuosity, a magisterial takedown of the *magister* in his various (gendered) guises: as author, as authoritative critic, as colonial administrator, as "economic man," as "autonomous, self-knowing individual" (14). Elam considers an alternative ethos developed by a cast of minor characters: avid and proudly "immature" readers (10), inexpert philologists, offbeat librarians, and the members of anticolonial study groups whose engagements remain "dependent, deferential, impure, and fleeting" (16).[1] Even while *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* celebrates these figures and recovers their centrality to a range of interwar projects — both intellectual and political, both anticolonial and antiauthoritarian — there is a pathos to the motley crew's appearance in a single-authored scholarly monograph. Such a book has to have an author, and the author, who must be vetted, cannot be altogether inexpert. He cannot "refuse the calls of authorship" in order to "remain a reader" (5). He cannot, like Har Dayal, "refuse[] an authorial position in favor of a multitude of authorial voices (none of which … belong to him)" (24). But Elam's reader senses his solidarity with these refusals. It's as if his were a book that would have preferred not to be one, by an author who would have preferred to be part of an obscure undercommons, "an anonymous, … multitudinous collectivity" (9).

This tension is one of many things that make *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* so moving and persuasive: for all its sophistication, range, and conceptual force, the book is bravely willing to remind us of what it would rather be, which is also, I think, what it might

have been under another dispensation. What would humanistic study be like under institutional conditions that allowed for the broad, democratic distribution of “enjoyable practices, abundant personal liberties, frivolous demands, and expansive sociality” (15)? What form could a monograph take if it did not have to be a master class and could be truly provisional, part of an ongoing, open-ended, anonymous, and raucous collective conversation?

I have been suggesting that Elam’s book manages to envision and proleptically to enter that kind of conversation even while noting the factors that make it so difficult to sustain in the present. Among these factors, Elam contends, is a widespread insistence “on consequential values to-be-accrued, the imperious demand that criticism be instrumentalizable, and that subjects render themselves recognizable” (15). These demands discount forms of reading that are not results-yielding (which means most forms of reading, for Elam), and they condescend to forms of activism that do not seek state recognition. By contrast, Elam’s book is guided by the conviction that

> Politics can be “the art of the possible” for those whose lives are secured by the state or, in other words, only for those who can confidently know that they will live to see the “possible” attained. Those whose lives are not guaranteed by the state, or those whose lives the state actively expects to end, cannot afford the luxury of such politics. The “wretched of the earth” require, instead, a politics of the impossible. (2-3)

Here the impossible does not preclude action; it prompts “action in relative opacity” (4), “action in the present” (9). It asks us to abandon, in other words, the myths of clarity, calculability, and futurity that motivate politicians, university administrators, and many defenders of the humanities (15). The alternative that Elam proposes is a politics of friendship, and although it is practiced by those who “cannot afford the luxury” of uncritical belief in the art of the possible, it opens onto a kind of “communal luxury, or equality in abundance” (Ross 2016, 63). The university in its current form militates against this equality, separating those deemed worthy of admission from those who are not, sorting those rewarded with abundance from those relegated to situations of scarcity.

To be clear, I am not equating academic precarity with being someone whose life “the state actively expects to end” (Elam 2020, 3). I am instead observing that Elam’s book speaks to the former condition as well as the latter. This is already, indirectly announced in the book’s title, where — as in “Italian for Beginners” or “Physics for Poets” — the preposition points to a potential student body. *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* does not simply notethe abiding intimacy between states (colonial and otherwise) and universities (public and private), which reproduce inequality. The bookalso engages in a thought experiment, challenging us to imagine the kind of institution that would welcome the wretched of the earth and offer training in, of all things, literature.

In order to appreciate the stakes of Elam’s thought experiment, we can look to Frantz Fanon’s account of how decolonization brings about the refusal of colonial values:

> The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native’s mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. … Brother, sister, friend—these are words outlawed by the

> colonialist bourgeoisie, because for them my brother is my purse, my friend is part of my scheme for getting on. The native intellectual takes part, in a sort of auto-da-fé, in the destruction of all his idols: egoism, recrimination that springs from pride, and the childish stupidity of those who always want to have the last word. (Fanon [1961] 1963, 47)

It might at first seem strange to bring this passage into conversation with reflections on the fate of the academic humanities, reflections that so often center on neoliberal universities in the Global North. But I would wager that, for anyone who has recently been in a graduate seminar or attended a job talk or a visitor's lecture at one of these universities, it is not at all hard to see how, far from having been destroyed, the bourgeois "idols" that Fanon decries still stand tall. To say this is not to cast aspersions on individual colleagues; it is to note that, in what Elam calls "the continuous colonial present" (18), individualism shapes academic conversations, monographs, and markets alike.

We can read *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* against this background and as a response to it. If today the university remains, with exceptions, "a society of individuals … whose only wealth is individual thought," Elam calls for the decolonization of this society, and he does so by studying those who spoke the "words outlawed" under colonial rule: "Brother, sister, friend."[2] This is not often what's meant by the call to decolonize the university or the curriculum, but Elam's book shows compellingly that any decolonization worthy of the name would need to include, or perhaps begin with, a transformation of subjectivity, an alteration of the "imperious" habits that we have learned, the hierarchizing styles of thought that we have internalized and reproduced. These, Elam suggests, are among the material conditions that determine academic consciousness. His work shows that one corrective is reading.

For Elam, reading is inseparable from, sometimes even coextensive with, critique, and it is a comradely undertaking. To read is to become "sociophilic" like B. R. Ambedkar (63), "to consort in collective unknowing" like M. K. Gandhi (82), to enter into conversations with real or imagined interlocutors. These conversations can of course involve conflict, or debate of the consequential kind staged in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (88). But in Elam's book the stress falls on "inconsequence," in Anne-Lise François's sense and Leela Gandhi's, and on the shared pleasures of reading.[3] This pleasure persists even in the midst of conflict or when the reading project in question is "impossible," whether because of the planetary scope of its ambitions or the unrealizable nature of its (anti-teleological) aims.

In a move that beautifully redoubles the practices that he analyzes — Gandhi's listing of "Some Authorities" (86-87) or Bhagat Singh's composition of a commonplace book (98) — Elam brings Auerbach and Fanon together. He reads and rereads *Mimesis* alongside *The Wretched of the Earth*, splicing fragments of the two texts together and collating their claims. These are his chosen, non-authoritative authorities, the books that he seems to keep permanently open, arranged side by side, on his desk. Importantly, it's Elam's interest—or what Auerbach would call the "specific purpose" by which he's "guided"—that authorizes the arrangement (Auerbach [1953] 2003, 556). No scholarly norm sanctions it. What grounds the comparison is simply Elam's reading, and the pairing illustrates his claim that reading is an exercise in "sociophilia" (Elam 2020, 49, 63-66), a form of association in the double sense of conceptual linkage and intersubjective alliance. In this way, Fanon, the theorist of revolutionary violence, comes to share page space with Auerbach, whose "playing as it were

with [his] texts" makes a different kind of sense in Fanon's vicinity (Auerbach [1953] 2003, 556). This "playing" becomes legible as deeply serious and even in its own way revolutionary, with implications for the world beyond "the West."

More generally, Elam argues, quoting Auerbach, that comparative philological criticism and anticolonial thought are commensurable if not convergent: "Philological and anticolonial critique, asserting their status as 'provisional and incomplete,' are aesthetic and political projects without guarantees" (107). Here he is pairing Auerbach with Singh rather than with Fanon, but his conclusion is consistent with his reading of Fanon's work. Both philological and anticolonial critique, he writes, address "a world that *must* be otherwise, and so impossibly otherwise that we must commit to it without being its *figura*: We can neither prefigure nor preauthorize it. Instead, we might invest in the non-instrumentalizable virtues of reading, with and for others — whom we can neither know nor authorize [for] admission into this amorphous 'us'" (107). Asking us to imagine counterfactually that there could be *amor* in the amorphous as he puts the *philia* back into philology, Elam writes a love letter to two critical traditions. In the process, he shows us how and why we should set aside the figure of the critic as overweening, unloving, and unlovable, a caricature that is central to many versions of "postcritique."[4] Far from entailing arrogance and the denial of affect or attunement, critique, for Elam, is a humbling practice, undertaken "with and for others." As a means by which to cultivate "non-instrumentalizable virtues," it is an ethical exercise that puts us in touch with other readers and strengthens our commitment to projects that are no less necessary for being "impossible."

But how can we commit to a world that we cannot even pretend to prefigure? And how can we know that the virtues we cultivate will not be instrumentalized? In my own work, I have tried to trace the co-optation of pleasure and play in particular, asking how, under both liberal and fascist regimes, these become alibis for the operations of authority (McGlazer 2016; 2020). Or think of how recreational down-time comes to function as an occasion for momentary recharging, making us that much more efficient when the work week begins. As D. A. Miller writes in another context, "at least since the eighteenth century, play usually trains us for work," and forms of reading that revel in unknowing and deferral "may only bind us more profoundly to a society that thrives on delayed and ever-incomplete satisfactions" (Miller 1988, 89, 97). In this sense, projects that know themselves to be provisional and incomplete may still be amenable to co-optation by capitalism.

Even if, as Elam argues, "to read, to critique, is to relinquish one's self-mastery," nothing guarantees that this state of surrender will be open-ended (129). But this is part of what Elam means when he refers to "projects without guarantees" (107), and to note this absence of assured success is simply to repeat what Elam's extraordinary epilogue makes clear: that it is supremely difficult to "stop and leave" the world we know (118). I have suggested that this world is, in Elam's book, also implicitly a university, one that continues to administer master classes. Elam's "impossible subjects" are thus also practitioners of what Freud called the "'impossible' profession" that is education (Freud [1937] 1964, 248). Or rather, they might teach us even while abandoning all claims to authority, in another social world of students, teachers, friends. "He longs for friends," Elam writes of Auerbach (129). So do those of us left teaching in a university that must be otherwise.

References

Auerbach, Erich. (1953) 2003. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated by Willard R. Trask.Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Clover, Joshua. 2022. “Free Speech and Unfree Universities.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* October 22. https://www.chronicle.com/article/free-speech-and-unfree-universities.

Elam, J. Daniel. 2020. *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Fanon, Frantz. (1961) 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press.

François, Anne-Lise. 2008. “Lying Lightly: Lyric Inconsequence in Wordsworth, Dickinson, and Hardy.” In *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience*.Stanford: Stanford University Press, 129-217.

Freud, Sigmund. (1937) 1964. “Analysis Terminable and Interminable.” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXIII. Edited and translated by James Strachey with Anna Freud et al. London: Hogarth Press, 211-53.

Gandhi, Leela. 2014. “Inconsequence: Some Little-Known Mutinies around 1946.” In *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900-1955*.Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 116-48.

Kurnick, David. 2020. “A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas.” *ELH* 87, no. 2: 349-74.

McGlazer, Ramsey. 2016. “Learning by Hart: Gender, Image, and Ideology in Vittorio de Sica’s *Maddalena zero in condotta*.” *The Italianist* 36, no. 2: 187-213.

—. 2020. *Old Schools: Modernism, Education, and the Critique of Progress*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Miller, D. A. 1988. *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ross, Kristin. 2016. *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*.New York: Verso.

Skaria, Ajay. 2022. “The Subaltern and the Minor: For Qadri Ismail.” *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory* 5, no. 2: 275-309.

---

[1] For a beautiful essay on the minor that also learns from and responds to Elam’s book, see Skaria 2022. I am grateful to Ajay Skaria and to Sharad Chari for bringing *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* to my attention.

[2] For recent confirmation, see Clover 2022.

[3] See especially Francois 2008 and Gandhi 2014.

[4] For more on this caricature and for a critique of its prevalence, see Kurnick 2020, especially pp. 354-55.

About the Authors

Ramsey McGlazer is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *Old Schools: Modernism, Education, and the Critique of Progress* (Fordham University Press, 2020) and co-editor, with Joshua Branciforte, of *Reaction Formations: The Subject of Ethnonationalism* (Fordham University Press, 2023).

How to Cite

McGlazer, Ramsey. May 19, 2023. "Impossible Professions." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Ajay Skaria | May 19, 2023

It does not seem an exaggeration to say that we are in the midst of a re-evaluation of the egalitarian political thinkers and actors of nineteenth and early twentieth century India—Bhimrao Ambedkar, Saraladebi Chaudrani, Mohandas Gandhi, Mohammed Iqbal, Jotirao Phule, M. N. Roy, Bhagat Singh, Indulal Yagnik, Yashpal, and so many others besides. Increasingly, we have come to conceive of them as thinkers of the minor, or at least place their thinking in relation to the question of the minor. Daniel Elam's slim and elegant book is an extraordinarily important addition to this vein of scholarship.

To get to the implications of this term minor, it helps to distinguish between four moments in the writing of the history of modern India. The first three have already been quite extensively described. There is the nationalist moment, which remained a significant strand all the way down to Bipan Chandra, and which celebrated independence as the beginning of an emancipated society. There is the more critical Marxist and leftist tradition, which continues to be important and valuable today, which stresses the way in which post-independence India was marked by the dominance of the subcontinental elite, and which found its telos in seeking a different kind of state. I think what these two moments share, despite the enormous differences between them, is what could be called a statist or sovereignty-centered hope—a hope for transforming the Indian state itself, and for transforming sovereignty too.

And then, from around the eighties, as this statist hope fades, there emerges the early moment of *Subaltern Studies,* which is critical of statism itself as an orientation. In this stage, the emphasis is on the separate domain of subaltern activity, which resists incorporation into the nationalist narrative or escapes it. This is also the moment of the focus on the power of dominant social groups and the disempowerment of subaltern groups.

What I am calling the fourth moment could be described as an intensification of this subaltern critique. This intensification inflects the concept of the subaltern with that of the minor. How do we distinguish the minor from the subaltern? As a concept, *subaltern* names those who find themselves denied equality, and are perhaps so disempowered as to be unable to claim it. Subalternity is morally wrong, something that calls for immediate redress. By contrast, the minor is a moral principle—or, more correctly, comportment—that brings the subaltern into view in a democratic way.

The minor includes but is more than the minority or minors. *Minorities* usually refers to enumerated and identifiable groups in a subordinate position in a polity. *Minors* refers to all those who do not have the power to act as citizens or full legal subjects: today, this term legally applies only to children—but not only, if we remember the Kerala High Court judge who insisted a 24-year-old Muslim woman was not adult enough to decide whom to marry. In talking of "the minor," I want to include these two senses, but I also want to get to what underlies both of them: the sense of embodying practices, beliefs, or even a way of being that is at odds with the norms dominant in society.

And it is because the affirmation of a space for such dissent is the core principle of any democratic politics that the minor can be described as a moral principle or bearing. This principle or bearing, moreover, manifests itself as a "who": it refers to those who are not dominant, but claim equality without abandoning their minor status. Such equality, for example, is very evidently what the LGBTQ+ movement seeks. In other words, the minor is not a majority in waiting. Any equality, to be democratic, must retain an openness to the minor. And a politics that actually assumes the bearing of the minor is what we call a minor politics.

This minor politics itself divides continuously into and between two "forms." One form concerns itself with a sovereignty-centered politics, and the institutional protections and rights that democratic states extend to individuals and minorities are one manifestation of this form. It is this form that Ambedkar usually describes as political democracy and that manifests itself as republican or liberal democracy, or some combination of the two. The second form is arguably the crux of what Ambedkar describes as social democracy. Here democracy proceeds very differently — by relinquishing or at least maintaining a skeptical relation with sovereignty-centered politics and striving instead for socialities that nourish difference and dissent more intensely than is possible in any sovereignty-centered order.

Of course, the concept of the minor does not work by itself. It brings along with it several other concepts: minority, majority, major, recognition, enemy, civil war, the impossible, critique, sovereignty, violence, and so on. Many of these concepts have been around arguably for a long time. But the concept of the minor serves as a new and especially powerful quilting point, or perhaps one should say a new magnetic lode, that reorients these older concepts, transforms them internally, and brings them together in an especially illuminating way.

There are reasons why the question of the minor has come to new prominence now. Socially, a range of developments are enabling the proliferation of spaces for the minor: Dalit mobilizations, movements for gender equality, LGBTQ+ movements, and so on. But there is also the rise, both institutional and social, of a new majoritarianism. On the cusp of these two

developments, the minor are arguably more visible today, and by extension more visible as a principle in the past, than they were earlier. Thus we see the minor and the conceptual constellation around it in the work of several social theorists who differ considerably from and with each other but are all broadly committed to an egalitarian and democratic politics; so it is also that we see so many popular mobilizations that are skeptical of sovereign power.

What makes Elam's book so timely and important in this moment of churning is its very subtle and nuanced exploration of moments when four figures who were quite prominent in Indian politics — Lala Har Dayal, Bhimrao Ambedkar, Mohandas Gandhi, and Bhagat Singh — strove for that politics of the minor which pivots towards a relinquishing of sovereignty-centered forms of power. Elam picks on a minor strand in each of these thinkers and uses it to unsettle our canonical understanding of them. He turns to Har Dayal's quiet *Hints for Self-Culture* and finds it to be organized around "practices of ignoring the state, rather than addressing it" — not by "ideas" but by "imagination," that "unruly unit of political and aesthetic action" (Elam 2020, 35, 41); he finds it also to be invested in "youth, newness and immaturity" (41). He turns to the world of Ambedkar's early years in Columbia and finds that his "antiauthoritarian critique" and sociology, like those of W. E. Du Bois, took shape before sociology turned scientific, when sociology "was still pliable enough—'hesitant' enough—to be useful for a radical politics of anti-racism, anticolonialism, and anti-casteism" (55); this pliability allowed leftist scholars to conceptualize race and caste together as "color-caste."

With Gandhi, the focus is on moments when he "failed spectacularly" (69); Elam suggests that the "immaturity, superstition, nonsense, incorrigibility, unseriousness, and foolishness" of these moments are "the features of an impossible politics, rooted in perpetual relinquishment of mastery and its attendant values (maturity, reason, comprehensibility, seriousness)" (71). With Bhagat Singh, the book explores his reading practices while facing the gallows and suggests that "reading was revolutionary … precisely because it was not in the service of scholarship, mastery, authority, or expertise. Reading, especially in the face of death, was revolutionary because it was inconsequential" (93).

Elam's book deepens our thinking of the minor in three ways. For a start, it affirms critique in the spirit of the minor. We often associate critique with Kant, and rightly so. But in doing so, we sometimes run the risk of forgetting that there is also another tradition of critique. This tradition is represented by many people: those who Elam invokes most emphatically are Walter Benjamin and Frantz Fanon. So rather than saying that critique has run out of steam, as some more sloppy and self-satisfied formulations have suggested, Elam very clearly wants to practice a critique in the spirit of the minor. Such a critique is driven by the spirit of the unknowing rather than the spirit of expertise which seeks to reveal secrets.

Second, this other spirit of critique manifests itself in Elam's emphasis on the trope of reading. What makes reading so important here is that reading involves, as he puts it, "a disavowal of authorial mastery." To read is to become impure, affected by others. Thus, Elam brings out how reading was central to each of the four figures that he deals: how they refuse to speak as experts, how they repeatedly assert their lack of expert knowledge, how they insist on their amateur status. As such, reading is anti-authoritarian, refuses to limit itself to any one geographical "culture," and in its very promiscuity convokes a world literature. In the spirit of this argument, Elam's chapter on Ambedkar not only notes that Ambedkar was a voracious reader but stresses that he was a reader who "read in ways that cannot be

catalogued" (48), and who moreover read in ways that undid the claims of texts to authority. But Elam's third theme is his most provocative: for him, these four figures are thinkers of the impossible. To get a sense of what is stake in this word *impossible*, it helps to contrast it to its counterpoint — *possible*. To say that something is possible is to be able to define it as an end or goal and to at least dimly see a path to that end or goal. To say that something is impossible is to say one or both of two things: that we see no path or means to the end or goal, or/and that we have only the dimmest apprehension or intimation of what the end itself is.

Why does the impossible matter? To my mind, because it is the most intensely ethical moment: the moment when ethics is transmuted into religion, speaking here of religion not in the sense that modern disciplinary formations such as anthropology or history or sociology have understood it, but in the sense that Ambedkar and Gandhi by different paths bring to the term. Very broadly speaking, ethics, at least in its modern iteration, lays claim to a certain universality and reason (this is what distinguishes it from a related formation, morality); relatedly, it is concerned with the possible. Ethics is exemplified in the Kantian categorical imperative to treat others never merely as means but also as ends in themselves. Doing so requires an entire institutional apparatus that draws on both public reason and expertise: it is this apparatus that we describe as secular democracy.

Of course there is a certain impossibility to ethics also: nobody is ever going to realize the categorical imperative in most of their relations. But that impossibility is what is commonly (mis)called idealism. (I add 'mis' in parenthesis because this idealism can be very materialist — for example, in many socialist traditions). To be an idealist in this sense is to seek an ethical goal, to recognize that its possibility lies not in the present but in the future, and to try and organize society and sovereignty so as to achieve that future. Such an idealism is surely at work Preamble of the Indian constitution, which calls to a republic organized around justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity; the length of the constitution itself surely has to do in part with instituting possible paths to this ideal.

However, the focus of Elam's book is not so much on this impossibility for which we might retain the term idealism. Rather, the focus here is on something far more intriguing and challenging—the impossible itself as a bearing and comportment. What distinguishes the impossible as such a quasi-concept is that it involves relinquishing sovereignty over oneself and seeking a sociality organized around the relinquishment of sovereignty. This is why the impossible is difficult to describe in terms of the conventional language of means and ends: we require sovereignty over ourselves both to identify a goal and to exercise the means to achieve such a goal. This is also why the term religion is so apposite for describing the impossible: to be religious rather than ethical is to surrender one's sovereignty, and the religiosity of the impossible involves moreover a distinctive surrender—one that is not a subordination to a higher sovereignty.

This politics of the impossible manifests itself in Elam's book in two ways. One is what he describes as the concern with inconsequence. Thus, for example, Bhagat Singh is asking for books to read even as he is preparing for the gallows. Reading when preparing for death cannot be a striving for mastery. There is a certain inconsequential reading going on here, which Daniel beautifully hints at. But what Elam implicitly recognizes, though he could arguably have foregrounded it more, is that the "inconsequential" is not insignificant or

immaterial. Rather, the inconsequential matters and signifies in a different way—not because of an externally applied effect, as consequential things do, but because it tries to transform us and those around us in our very being. For this inconsequence, terms such as immaturity or failure—which only invert the Kantian problematic—are not adequate.

For example, when Ambedkar exhorts Dalits to self-respect, this is not a means to an end. It will have consequences, of course, but it is not because of these consequences that he seeks self-respect. Self-respect is an end in itself with incalculable consequences, because once we accord equality to ourselves, it is difficult to predict how we will behave. (In this sense, the Kantian language of autonomy is not enough to understand a radical politics of self-respect.)

The second is the curious place of sovereignty. To be sovereign, after all, is to be able engage effectively in the politics of the possible. Unsurprisingly, then, Elam finds that the four figures he is most concerned with have a skeptical relation with sovereignty. He brings out this relinquishment of sovereignty most strikingly in Gandhi. As Elam notes, it was precisely through such relinquishment that Gandhi worked. To quote him again, Gandhi's politics often involves a doubled renunciation:

> Phrases like "please give me up as foolish," "allow me to lose this debate," and "allow me to be wrong" put Gandhi's self (*satya*) in the grip (*graha*) of others. Gandhi locates a position in which he asks the other to relinquish, on his behalf, himself. … Losing the ability to lose yourself so that another person might lose you is a precarious and unsustainable politics of radical egalitarianism. (76)

This way of reading the impossible is provocative, but it also raises four difficult questions that the book does not address, and that Elam or others will hopefully take up in future work. One question has to do with the "form" of the impossible. All the four figures Elam deals with are concerned with the impossible, but what is essential to remember is that both the ideal and the impossible are concerned with transforming the potential into the actual. They seek to do so, however, by different paths—one through sovereignty and the other through the relinquishment of sovereignty. So when Gandhi says, "please consider me foolish," this does not only mean "please ignore me"; it is not a request to disengage—not, at least, when he is speaking to those he wants to convert. "Foolishness" itself here organizes a politics of the impossible that seeks to convert those who consider him fools.

A second question arises from the fact that all four are invested in the impossible possibility that is idealism. It is not only the Constitution, whose writing Ambedkar led, which is an exercise in the politics of the possible. Gandhi too did not demand "an impossible Indian as a necessary pre-requisite for Indian self-rule" (74); rather, while he demanded that impossible form of *swaraj* from himself (even if inconsistently) of himself, he accepted that his allies were committed to parliamentary *swaraj* (arguably he was too in some ways) and helped them achieve it. And while I know the writings of Har Dayal and Bhagat less well, my sense is that they too critically cherish a politics of the possible in its highest form, that of idealism. All of which raises the question: what is the togetherness of the impossible and the possible, or the politics of consequence and politics of inconsequence?

The third question is related to these first two: could Elam's argument be thrown into sharper relief by making a distinction between authority and power? Authority is not quite same as

power. If you have power over me, it is something you can exercise even punitively. But what is striking about authority is that it stands apart from you and me. Authority is a certain acknowledgment of the rightness of power. This is why it is very possible to have power without authority: this is what we call authoritarianism and is what a tyrant exercises. Social orders become hegemonic when authority and power converge. And somebody like Gandhi or Ambedkar or Bhagat Singh—surely we could say they spent significant portions of their lives exercising authority without power. Authority without power: is this another way of describing the impossible as distinct from the ideal and its social manifestation as hegemony?

The fourth question: these four thinkers, and especially Bhagat Singh, Ambedkar, and Gandhi, are in tension with each other. One question that future scholarship (perhaps by Elam himself) will hopefully take up concerns the relation between these four thinkers, between various thinkers of the impossible. What would it mean to put them into conversation with each other?

For example, we usually think of Gandhi and Ambedkar as thinkers whose positions are opposed to one another. And as long as we understand them only as historical actors in their time, this is quite correct. For while they shared a hostility to Hindu nationalism and caste oppression, they understood these phenomena in incommensurably different ways, and this resulted in their taking positions that were opposed to each other. But when we think with them—that is to say, elicit the potentialities of their concepts for our own times, understand them as thinkers of the impossible and the minor—then their relation no longer appears as simply oppositional; rather, what comes into view is arguably a parallax relation. What is this parallax relation, and not only between Gandhi and Ambedkar, but also between other thinkers and actors of the minor? Pursuing these questions might shed a different kind of light on the four protagonists of Elam's thought-provoking book; maybe they will appear as even more complex figures than they already do in this rendering. But in the meantime, amongst the lasting contributions of the book is the new pathways it opens to the thinking of the minor.

Note: Some of the arguments ventured above have been further developed in "The Subaltern and the Minor: For Qadri Ismail" (*Critical Times* 5, no. 3, 2022, and in "Revisiting Non-Willing Freedom: How Gandhi Matters Today" (*Cultural Critique Online*, Frame 2, June 2022), which were both completed after this essay was originally written for a panel on Daniel Elam's book.

About the Authors

Ajay Skaria is a historian, and teaches at the University of Minnesota. His recent research has explored questions around intellectual history, political theory, history as a mode of understanding, and the modern politics of caste. In addition to several articles and two co-edited volumes, he is the author of *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India* (1999) and*Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance* (2015).

How to Cite

Skaria, Ajay. May 19, 2023. "The Politics of the Impossible." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Drishadwati Bargi | May 19, 2023

Despite falling into disrepute, due to the two infamous totalitarianisms of the century, recovery of a utopianism without a utopia or a utopian impulse has long been one of the crucial projects of contemporary critical theorists, located in the department of humanities and cultural studies (Jameson 2007). This is not least due to the fact that political theorists have diagnosed the present in terms of its anti-utopianism, lack of futurity and cynical reactions against movements and knowledge-systems that have attempted to conceive the world otherwise (Brown 2019). This cynicism of the present is equally directed at the Liberal arts and the Humanities as much as it is directed at democratic movements. Perhaps the latter is an understated context of Daniel J. Elam's postcolonial project of recovery and restitution of the impossible politics of anticolonial praxis of philology or reading. In this conjuncture, to recuperate philology as an anticolonial and anti-authoritative praxis is also to recuperate the humanities, as an essential mode of democratic co/existence.

The readers that Elam's project recuperates are however, for historical reasons almost always at a tangent from the securities of institutional protection, state-patronage, and recognition. They are Frantz Fanon, Bhagat Singh, B.R Ambedkar, M.K Gandhi, and Lala Har Dayal. Frantz Fanon's condition as an exiled black intellectual on the run and on the verge of death is the general condition of possibility for such a readerly project. This is a condition of intellectual engagement that on the one hand precludes certainty and full knowledge of the future and on the other hand inhabits a present that is gnawed by the sense of an ending. The project's pessimistic optimism is derived from the death-bound nature of their respective present. As Aishwary Kumar's *Radical Equality* has shown, the clearest interpreter of such a mortalist optimism is B.R Ambedkar, who, as Reader of Buddhist philosophy, formulates this through the concept of "sunnyata" and the phrase "being is becoming." The inherent impermanence of all compound matters, including human beings; is the condition through which change becomes possible. The experience of death is not something those sentient beings encounter only at the end of life, instead it is what interpenetrates life, interrupting it continuously (Ambedkar [1957] 2011, 130). To this extent, Elam's thematization of readerly praxis on the verge of death is but a recognition of this condition of finitude as not just the ground but also the mode of utopianism of Ambedkar or Fanon's political-intellectual projects.

As a praxis, reading is fundamentally a de-idealizing experience, something that leads to the immersion of the self in the ephemeral, the contingent and the uncertainties of the present. The chapter on Bhagat Singh's jail-notebooks makes this clear by foregrounding the constitutive inconsequentiality of reading a few days before one's certain death. It so happened that when Singh was in prison and waiting to be hanged, he made a demand on the jailors that he be regularly supplied with books and newspapers, as behoves the dignity of a political prisoner. But this right to read as a political prisoner was in essence useless, or inconsequential given Singh was about to be dead in a few days. Elam writes that this

demand to be supplied with books and newspapers attest to a commitment to a present that refuses the "status quo of the future" (Elam 94). From these books came Singh's curated collection of notes, observations, and quotations from contemporary authors like Upton Sinclair, Emma Goldman, Rabindranath Tagore, and Lenin. Elam reads these as "commonplace notebooks," created to perform self-cultivation and self-mastery, by a figure who was about to be put to death in a few days. Therefore, this was a kind of self-discipline without a goal or telos, an aesthetics of the self, on the brink of death. We can of course ask if the concept of dignity that Singh evokes even on the verge of dying can be measured via inconsequentiality at all, and the fact that dignity immediately brings to mind a series of prohibitions related to status, caste, gender, and humanity. For instance, what does Singh's insistence on the division between political and non-political prisoners say about his revolutionary virtue? Don't we perceive here a lingering shadow of the notion of *maryada* that limited Gandhi's politics of egalitarianism, despite Singh's critique of Gandhi's insufficient anti-authoritarianism (Kumar 2015, 303)? This doubt however is put to rest by Elams's interpretation of Singh's desire for self-cultivation as something that defies mastery and authorship. In Singh's endless collection of notes, Elam reads a sign of the former's reluctance to demystify the chaos of the present via the organizing and systematizing power of knowledge. When Singh cites Prudhon and Mazzini as a justification for his terrorist attack, it is his authorial voice that he eschews and opens a readerly collective with unfamiliar others. These self-effacing gestures make him a bearer of revolutionary virtue, a practice that is not different from sacrificial love. Through refusal of appropriation of the present via knowledge, Singh makes way for the future.

A similar reading for self-effacement and renunciation is traced in Lala Har Dayal's *Hints of Self Culture*, and his essays like "The Indian Peasant," the philosopher, sanskritist and freedom fighter, founder of the *Ghadr* (Mutiny) party in California, United States. Through his selective reading of William Morris and Herbert Spencer, Har Dayal created an "anticolonial utopian imagination for his world-state." This utopian vision is enabled by a self-effacing, futural critique, in Har Dayal's assertion that the multitudes of India "do not have a voice" and that their epic "remains to be written." Har Dayal himself refrains from offering this voice and it is this gesture that opens the Indian literary tradition for another kind of writing. His *Hints of Self Culture,* written as a self-help manual for young people, similarly gestures towards the future while simultaneously renouncing authorial control. The philosophers he engages with move across time, ignoring the demands of linearity, and imagination and fiction take over the presentation of facts.

The convergence of Bhagat Singh, Lala Har Dayal on the one hand and B.R Ambedkar on the other is possible because Elam puts Ambedkar's democracy in a specific mode. It is no longer to be conceived in terms of republicanism, with an active citizenry's desire for the rule. Rather, this is a democracy that privileges co-existence, cooperation, and renunciation, as in the case of Lala Har Dayal, the deliberate antipolitical nature of his *Hints of Self Culture* lets him focus on friendship, fugitive egalitarianism, and self-care. Here individuals actively eschew mastery, both ethical and epistemological, for the sake of a creative or cultivated collective. This is where Ambedkar's reading of John Dewey and their utilization of the Bergsonian concept of social endosmosis may become more significant than it appears in Elam's interpretation.

A biological term to describe the diffusion of substance caused by "push" from outside the membrane to the inside of the membrane, Bergson used it to describe the relationship between the external world and the mind, and the latter's permeability. The Ambedkarite term "Social endosmosis" would therefore refer to a condition of correspondence, contagion, and contamination among the denizens of the social world (Elam 59). This notion of contamination and permeability of minds and matters once again makes Ambedkar an ally of Fanon, who ended his *Black Skin White Masks* with the evocation of *lysis*, the disintegration of the cell, by the rupture of its boundaries (Elam 65). This alliance or constellation of Fanon and the Bergsonian Ambedkar point at the fact that far from positing a notion of a pacified or harmonious social, the concept of endosmosis contains within itself the possibility of dissolution and disintegration of the social. While the desire for rule that radical democracy is constitutive of is surely supplanted with a more horizontal understanding of power, the possibility of a complete dissolution is taken to the heart of the social through this concept. It is this desire for the dissolution of the social that is perhaps at the core of Ambedkar's burning of Manusmriti or solving the *riddles* of Hinduism. Representative of transcendent power or law, Ambedkar's democracy is rendered possible only through the latter's dissolution or annihilation. Therefore, to Elam's argument that the burning of Manusmriti is an act of destruction of sovereignty, I would add that this burning is essentially an act of violence that unites Ambedkar with Fanon and reveals their shared desire for a world outside the confinements of colonialism and caste. Reading for Ambedkar then exists in continuity with resistance against sovereignty as well a desire for dissolution, forceful contagion, and collective action like public conversion out of Hinduism.

These thinkers wrote during anticolonial times, but it is precisely their reticence towards a full-fledged (political) authorship that makes them relevant for postcolonial politics. Their ethical abdication of political authorship in their present paradoxically render them politically useful in their future, the postcolonial present characterized by authoritarianism and violence by supposedly independent nation-states. Once included in such a project, where they are regarded as readers in and not authors of their world, these indispensable figures of postcolonial anti-authoritarian politics undergo radical depersonalization and deindividualization. As a result, the oeuvre of BR Ambedkar or Bhagat Singh, very much like the unformed forms of Lala Har Dayal's notebooks may no longer be treated as complete and concluded entities but fragmentary and heterodox receptacles of divergent political imagination, conflicts, and desires. If they are to be read as reticent authors of politics, self-effacing and heteronomous, then their texts begin to function as relays or passages between the present and the future, or the self and the society, their readerly praxis fundamentally relativising the grip of the present day cynicism of the postcolonial experience over its denizen's imagination.

There is a recuperative desire at work in Elam's project, a recuperation no doubt triggered by the pessimistic or cynical present characterized by a marked reaction against movements and imagination that have attempted to create alternative worlds and lives. This is a recuperation of the unfinished, ignored, deliberately ignorant and politically weaker, and arguably the redundant aspects of anticolonial visionaries like Ambedkar or Fanon. What is at stake in such a recuperation of the chosen readers' renunciation of authorship and knowledge, something that leads to the specifically banal and redundant forms their readings take? A self-effacing readerly ethics makes space for love for the unknown, the unfamiliar,

and the youthful; and consequently, opens the present for a future. Elam's interpretation of these unauthorized fragments on self-care, interlaced with Fanon and Ambedkar's critique of the social and historical conditions of possibility of such practices, render prominent a significant aspect of self/care; the fact that care can contain within itself the impossibility of its realizability, and that an investment in self/care can bring up experiences of violence and dissolution, sacrifice and annihilation, and hence of failure and hope. Fredric Jameson writes about the institutionalized genre of science fiction, and the way it formally dramatizes utopia's desire to imagine the impossible and the impermissible. Elam's work is a rejoinder to Jameson in that it foregrounds that the extremely banal practices of writing self-care manuals or demanding newspapers from the prison authorities can contain within them moments of impossibility, and excess, through their sheer lack of instrumentality and effectiveness. In short, the necessary, and repetitive practices of care can contain within them moments of freedom and dissolution, and that care can be political.

For a person like me, who has been researching care in the context of Ambedkarite politics and culture, this utopianization of self/care remains one of the most provocative aspects of Elam's beautifully experimental work.

References

Ambedkar, B.R [1957] 2011. *Buddha and his Dhamma* ed. by Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Brown, Wendy 2019. *In the Ruins of Neo-Liberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West,* New York: Columbia University Press.

Jameson, Fredric 2007. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions,* New York: Verso.

Kumar, Aishwary 2015. *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi and the Risk of Democracy* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

About the Authors

Drishadwati Bargi is an advanced doctoral candidate in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, University of Minnesota. She is writing a dissertation on contemporary dalit writings and anti-caste cinema entitled *Banality, re-mediated: Dalit visions in times of Spectacular Majoritarianism*. She has written for Voice of Dalit, Economic and Political Weekly, Cultural Critique, philosophia: A Journal of Transcontinental feminism, Journal of Narrative Theory, and Dalit Camera: Through Untouchable Eyes.

How to Cite

Bargi, Drishadwati. May 19, 2023. "Readers of the Impossible Present." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Dilip Menon | May 19, 2023

Reading is, more often than not, an act that does not attend to consequence. It is an inconsequential act, not in the sense of it being of no consequence, but rather, that it is not dependent on generating consequences. One reads for pleasure, to gain erudition, or just to be well informed. That, of course, is the ideal. For students in the hothouse schools of Asia, reading is of the greatest significance. In fact, gratuitous reading might take away from the purposive reading that is required for high grades in the public examinations that determine life trajectories. For those in academe, again, reading is instrumental as one crafts one's career. Reading widely is good, but one reads within paradigms and locates oneself within them towards the building of putative communities of affinity. Reading too widely can be counterproductive and may bring upon oneself the mild scorn reserved for mere bibliophiles. For after all, reading is labor towards generating a product that stands in for one's merit and originality and allows one's peers to judge the extent of individual scholarship. The question raised by Elam's book of inconsequentialist reading interestingly works with an unlikely cast of characters: deeply political beings, anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian by temperament. These figures include the early Indian nationalists Lala Har Dayal and Bhagat Singh, and the contending dyad at the heart of Indian modernity: BR Ambedkar and Gandhi. Elam argues that their practices of reading were not teleological in terms of a desired outcome, nor instrumental in the sense of fashioning a new world in the present. There was indeed something gratuitous about their reading: Bhagat Singh while waiting for the gallows; Har Dayal cultivating self towards an ambiguous future; Ambedkar while waiting for a non-arriving landscape of freedom; and Gandhi reading and writing prodigiously, and promiscuously, towards an unremitting fashioning of an ever-changing identity. This is a counter-intuitive reading of a cast of characters who, in our general understanding, were unrelenting and intransigent in their demand that the world could be otherwise.

Much of course turns on a set of ideas that Elam proposes, centering on "modes of refusal, non-productivity, inconsequence, inexpertise, and non-authority" (x); "revolutionary inconsequentialism" (xii); and "a celebration of unknowingness ad infinitum" (xii). Given what we know of the lives and plangent thought of the protagonists here, devoted to an anti-colonialism under the sign of an utter commitment to engagement with institutions as much as ideas, this exposition might appear either eccentric, or merely contrarian. However, if we think with a narrative of unintended consequences and the deep irony of the authoritarianism of the postcolonial state (the object of Fanon's coruscating predictions), then one could ask, surely, "inconsequentialism" is not what these individuals had in mind as the terminus of their thinking? Acknowledging that they, like all humans, made history, but not in the circumstances of their choosing, we can be wary of judgment. However, in choosing these particular individuals Elam's argument about their commitment to unfinishedness—a thinking of ends as dedicated to a staying with beginnings—is made easier. Three of them did not die a natural death: Lala Hardayal died at 54 of suspected poisoning, Bhagat Singh was martyred, and Gandhi was assassinated. Ambedkar died at the age of 65, with the unfinished manuscript of his book on the Buddha and his Dhamma awaiting completion on his study table. None of them lived to see their life's work to completion (if indeed there was such a trajectory, and I believe there was). Can we conjecture from these special circumstances that they were interested only in a "politics of the meantime" (6), that they were working out a politics of eternal deferral of resolution, willing to exist in the "waiting room of history"? Elam

suggests, along with David Scott, that we must think less with the romance of anticolonial engagement and more with the idea of tragedy. While I am in agreement with rejecting romance as a trope, how would the idea of tragedy work alongside Elam's argument that none of his protagonists had a political trajectory of fulfillment in mind. Inconsequentialism has filiations with detachment, quietism, even irony—but tragedy? Implicit in the idea of tragedy is the notion of a future—inevitable or unexpected. Can there be tragedy within a conception of contentment with an eternal present? What mood indeed, can we attribute to the imagination of "worldwide egalitarianism in the unlikelihood of any future at all" (5)?

Central to the book is the practice of reading of a particular kind. Isabel Hofmeyr's excellent recuperation of Gandhi's practice of, and exhortation towards, slow reading—a democratization of scholastic forms of attention—is a model here. However, in Hofmeyr, what we have is an attention to *process*—reading widely, making scrapbooks, copying out inspiring quotes, making connections, and so on. There is no disavowal of *ends*; Gandhi's reading is about a refashioning of self, of rendering oneself less than hermetic, opening up individuals to filiation with others. Elam is right in pointing out that this is not about mastery. However, it is not about disavowal either; there is an end in mind. An idea of reading that foregrounds its "own incompleteness, in-expertise, and often its own implausibility" (12) seems rather etiolated given the sheer energy and incandescence of the readings of Elam's protagonists. However, to be fair, Elam states that he is "not interested in any demonstrable act of reading per se" (14) and therefore "readers and reading are irrelevant to this book" (15). This does sound like a Humpty Dumpty method: when Elam reads a text, "it means just what [I] choose it to mean—neither more nor less." It is poignantly true that "we must begin a mission in relative opacity, without guarantee of fulfilling it" (18). However, would it not be pathological to relinquish an engagement with the future at all? What if we are to think with the idea of guarantee through Stuart Hall—of recognizing that we are always dealing with a "story without end, a narrative which doesn't have a conclusion," and that, indeed, is the ground of our politics of futurity, as, arguably, it was for Elam's protagonists? Hall makes a resonant case for a politics without telos, which is not a politics of abnegation, in looking to a "Marx who offers a marxism without guarantees, a marxism without answers" (Hall 1983, 43).

Har Dayal writes in the aftermath of the quashing of what came to be known as the Ghadr conspiracy, in which expatriate Indian revolutionaries worked towards overthrowing colonialism, and in Har Dayal's vision, creating a World State under which the voiceless would find voice. The future, he believed, "will come in its own good time" (Elam 2020, 38) given that the trajectories of History were chaotic: "irregular, disorderly, and haphazard" (33). In his writings, Har Dayal, a polyglot, engaged with translations, emphasized cooperative study, and in keeping with the times, wrote down copious quotations from the originals. Ambedkar also cited authorities profusely, and in the case of his acknowledged teacher, John Dewey, reproduced verbatim his words without quotation marks. Gandhi, in his journal *Indian Opinion*, very much followed the same practice, as did Bhagat Singh in his notebook, reproducing verbatim from Upton Sinclair's compendium of revolutionary texts (as Elam shows with some detective acumen). What are we to make of this use of other people's words? Elam argues that this is a reading "without a goal of mastery" (103), a "renunciation" of one's own reading (87), and so on.

Here there is insufficient engagement with the historical practices of reading and the taking

of notes. As Stuart Hall points out about Marx's notebooks, there are entire chunks copied out from authors he reads, particularly Adam Smith. Or again, when we read Walter Benjamin's Arcades project, it is a collection of quotations from contemporaries with which he thinks. In neither of these cases is there an abnegation of authority; these extensive quotations were the provocations to thought and writing that would indeed fashion them masterfully into a coherent narrative. Both *Capital* and the Arcades project are unfinished, a status occasioned by the death of their authors, not because of a refusal of mastery or a politics of deferral. These notebooks, etc., must be read not in themselves but for the fact that they point to a place outside themselves.

About Gandhian reading strategies, it is not clear what Elam means when he says that "Gandhi reveled in his ability to *not* make sense" (68). That he provides a list of authorities at the end of *Hind Swaraj* need not be interpreted as the surrender of his mastery by deferring to the authorities, any more than Elam providing a bibliography to his book need be read as his surrender of self to those listed there. That Gandhi adopts a strategic humility (a rhetorical strategy as in the *Hind Swaraj*) should not be mistaken for a surrender of authority. Bose, Ambedkar, and regional Congress leaders, who were resolutely subordinated and sidelined as Gandhi emerged as the sole spokesperson for the Congress, were the people least deluded about "Gandhian" surrender of authority. Ajay Skaria's phrase "surrender without subordination" acquires another meaning when we look at Gandhian political practice. Elam discusses the incidents of Gandhi's non-engagement with Margaret Sanger on birth control (of which he disapproved) (78-9) and with Tagore on the Bihar earthquake as a punishment from god (Tagore thought this was wrongheaded). Gandhi avoids both agreement and disagreement through the strategies of sidestepping and disengagement with the arguments presented to him.

The book is at its best when it does close (and may I say masterful) readings of Ambedkar and his engagement with Spencer, Nietsche, and Dewey. Elam's original interpretation of the idea of endosmosis, central to Ambedkar's thinking (of the projected porous nature of humans as with cells), draws upon the hitherto unacknowledged influences of Henri Bergson and William James. The argument of a "relationship of shared consciousness and perception" (58)—which would undergird and generate a "contagious fraternity" (59) and emphasize contagion, contamination, and contaminability towards blowing apart the separation and non-touchability inherent to caste—is an original and provocative one. Here again, it is not clear why Elam characterizes this as "hesitant thought" (63). Arguably, Ambedkar had little time to make haste slowly. There is an evocative phrase on Ambedkarite politics — the abandonment of abandonment (124) — which profoundly and poetically captures the moment that Ambedkar, through conversion, leaves the poisonous embrace of Hinduism, while taking with him those otherwise condemned to a permanent subordination within its structures. The last chapter provides a set of reflections on freedom which point to the central antinomy of the book. Elam argues for an emancipatory politics that is both postcolonial and antiauthoritarian and seeks "increased affinities" (119)—a call to "leave our own selves in favor of the collectivity of unknown comrades" (119). This is a utopian call, arguing from the shackles of the present, and certainly not premised on inconsequentialism, hesitation, or the lack of telos. And in another masterful phrase, Elam advocates that instead of the Gandhian advocacy of "stopping without leaving" (125) that left the subordinate running to stay in the same place, we should stop and leave (118). A resounding yes, such as Molly Bloom would

have approved of.

This book on inconsequential reading begins with S. R. Ranganathan, mathematician and librarian, who created the colon classification for libraries to address the inadequacies of Dewey's decimal classification system. Ranganathan believed that reading as an enterprise was vast, unending, and anti-authoritarian in its impulses. He also believed that every book had its reader, and every reader had their book. The classification system was premised on the notion of the colon notation revealing everything that there was to know about the book in question, so that a librarian would not only be able to find a book but match a reader to a book. This was a notion of mastery bordering on hubris; the essence of a book rendered to a few letters of the alphabet and a few punctuation marks. In fact, the very antithesis of the surrender of mastery as life-principle that runs like a vein through the book. Ranganathan was a man with a plan—a fulfilled plan that, once mastered by a reader, no library was unconquerable. I can testify to this as, armed with Ranganathan's system, I strode through Indian libraries with unwavering steps in search of my quarry.

A vein running through this book is the attempt to think philological criticism and anti-colonial thought together (5), engaging with the putative resonances in their mutual reveling in impurity (the idea of translation and incommensurability), anti-mastery (the insufficiency of one's knowledge), and heterogeneity (the premise of comparison) (12). Auerbach's stress on points of departure and starting points is emphasized over resolution, mastery, and telos. Perhaps we could think with Auerbach's most sensitive interlocutor, Edward Said, while reflecting on the central premises of Elam's book. One needs to study beginnings, but one needs too to move beyond—to take the leap. As I have been arguing, this is indeed what Elam's protagonists did, except that Elam imprisons them within his rather tendentious argument about their radical hesitancy. "There is always the danger of too much reflection on beginnings. In attempting to push oneself further and further back to what is only a beginning, a point that is stripped of every use but its classified standing in the mind as a beginning, one is caught in a tautological circuit of beginnings about to begin" (Said 1968, 53).

References

Hall, Stuart. 1983. "For a Marxism without Guarantees." *Australian Left Review*, no. 84 (Winter): 39-43.

Said, Edward. 1968. "Beginnings." *Salmagundi* 2, no. 4 (8) (Fall): 36-55.

About the Authors

Dilip M. Menon is a cultural historian and works on literature, film, and social theory. He is currently a Professor of History at the Department of International Relations at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and Director of the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa. He has worked on issues of social inequality in India but over the past decade his concern has been with oceanic histories and knowledge from the global south. This has resulted in two edited volumes, *Ocean as Method* (Routledge, 2022) and *Changing Theory: Concepts from the*

Global South (Routledge, 2022).

How to Cite

Menon, Dilip. May 19, 2023. "Reading for the Future." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Omid Azadibougar | May 19, 2023

World Literature has been conceived in terms of translation and textual mobility and its allure is a utopia of literary *inclusion* where everything worth reading will be present. But reading practices are not independent of the material conditions that ensue from the asymmetrical structures of global capitalism, a condition exacerbated by the history of colonialism of the past centuries and the neocolonialism of the present. Moreover, as an institutional idea, World Literature is as much about inclusion as it is about *exclusion*: it aligns and re-aligns the world's texts in favorable ways by eliminating the "undesirable." But what happens to the texts written on the margins of this world and denied representation? Are they doomed to be interrupted and forgotten forever?

In *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics* (2020), J. Daniel Elam takes up these urgent questions and theorizes World Literature, with reference to colonial India, in a radical way that accommodates lost manuscripts, overlooked ideas, interrupted journeys, and cultural discontinuities in the context of anticolonial struggles for egalitarianism. This "other" World Literature was shaped by thinkers who fought with bare hands against the opulent machinery of the British Empire, which was armed by a sophisticated bureaucratic system that made its cultural logic sound more relevant, more efficient, and even more humane.

To advance this reading of World Literature, Elam deploys comparative philology in conjunction with the political aesthetics of anticolonialism and antiauthoritarianism to re-conceptualize reading and writing – the foundations of literature – under conditions of political strife. As such, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* joins a conversation in recent debates in the cultural sociology of reading (e.g. Thumala Olave 2022), and cultivates comparative literary studies beyond forms of postcolonial Eurocentrism that negate the diversity of colonized contexts (Alejandro 2017; Pino-Díaz 2022), or deem texts from colonized contexts suitable for study only when they can be successfully juxtaposed with colonial models.

In four chapters, the book delivers detailed analyses of the legacies of four revolutionary thinkers who, in their struggles against British colonialism, imagined the world otherwise: Lala Har Dayal, an advocate of armed rebellion; B.R. Ambedkar, an anti-caste activist; M.K. Gandhi, the leader of the Indian national independence; and Bhagat Singh, a key figure in "the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army" (7). In their revolutionary struggles the only certainty that any of these thinkers possessed was the uncertain nature of the world they imagined; how is it possible to think of the impossible in incertitude?

Reconnecting politics and aesthetics, Elam displaces the unsettling asymmetry of the global distribution of literature and begins reading from a corner that has heretofore appeared as

insignificant and has been oftentimes erased from literary history. Instead of thinking World Literature as an institution, “we might recuperate a ‘world literature’ of destitution (and of de-institution)” (17). In other words, reading from the position of the excluded departs “from a clean history of ideas, and on behalf of an anti-canon of literary thought” (8), to radically rethink World Literature as an unsatisfactory object that essentially “reproduces the very logic of imperial control” (17). Under “aesthetic imperialism,” in the words of Fløistad (2007), when thinking is always already constricted by the architecture of possibility, developed and disseminated from the centers of global colonial capitalism, this idea of World Literature is a revolutionary project.

Reading Inconsequentially

The revolution begins from the text and one’s relationship with it. Reading is, in fact, an ideological act determined by the material conditions of the reader’s position. There are two distinct and diametrically opposite ideas of reading: one initiates the reader into a hierarchical system where the promise of egalitarianism is subjected to the norms and rules of the dominant structure – academic and non-academic – that is sharply tilted in favor of authority. Here, the idea of expertise looms large because the structure is founded on authority as the location of, and the gate to, knowledge. Individuals initiated into this system maintain it and justify its authority. This is, in Elam’s reading, “consequential reading” and sustains the status quo: persons educated in the colonial system were privileged with access to institutions, and benefited from the perpetuation of forms of colonial institutionalized reading; the system in turn rewarded them with degrees and awards, prizes and memberships, authority and status. Hence, the key role of educational institutions in the colonial project because they sought to foster the rites of initiation and recruit as many “readers” as possible. In fact, T.B. Macaulay, in his famous “Minute on Indian Education” (1835), had this specific function for reading in mind: to position readers as “mimic men” in order to galvanize the status and authority of colonial power through consequential reading; needless to say, this kind of reading relies heavily on the canon.

Reading can also be a revolutionary act. For those positioned outside the system, reading was characterized by bold defiance, rejecting, through reading “for the sake of reading – that is, for its inconsequence” (ix), placement into the structures of colonial authority. Anticolonial thinkers, writes Elam, perpetually refused the “expertise” offered by the colonial power to expose “the hierarchical and anti-egalitarian norms at the heart of British liberalism and the European nation-state” (x). They resisted mimicking the British, but the revolutionary future they imagined, to be free from colonial dominance, could not materialize immediately; this meant “inconsequential reading” would remain outside educational institutions, the domain of colonial power. Therefore, in this kind of reading – defiantly bypassing authority and challenging the status quo – the intellectual base was the library, the open landscape of knowledge uncharted by the authority; the library “promoted a revolutionary inconsequentialism in the face of the imperial demand for practical knowledge” (xii). “Inconsequential reading” was founded upon a completely different set of norms and assumptions about the world, and how it should operate.

What purpose would inconsequential reading serve? The anticolonial antiauthoritarian reader was not a member of a class – the colonial bourgeois class – that consumed texts to consistently renew class membership but “an ideal figure for ethical and political practices”

(ix). Reading against authority and, naturally, expertise, the reader would rely on other communities and networks to cultivate "the possibility of egalitarian emancipation" (ix). If this was the ultimate goal, then the moment of revolution emerged when inconsequential reading occurred, "precisely because it urged readers to refuse the calls of authorship, and, relatedly, authority" (xii).

A true revolution would begin by negating the authority of the oppressor, embodied in the concept of expertise. In his analysis, Elam deploys comparative philology because it remains true to the emancipative ideals of anticolonial antiauthoritarianism as it "barricades against the temptations of scholarly expertise and mastery" (12) and "names not an object of study but rather a method of study, an orientation toward reading, and an orientation toward authority" (12-13). Hence the beginning of a project that reimagines World Literature in substance, in premise, and in method. Besides challenging institutionalized reading as World Literature, comparative philology is helpful in taking a big step away from Eurocentric literary studies and towards a wider space where the *world* is met. First, normative disciplinary knowledge is abandoned because acts of inconsequential reading sever the discipline from its "exclusive" structure and open a larger and global space: World Literature becomes "a struggle, even if inconsequential, against the forces of isolation, autonomy, insuperable difference, and incommensurability" (13); this powerfully facilitates solidarity between marginal positions across time and space.

Second, comparative philology mobilizes the world of anticolonial thinkers and resurrects reading-as-critique against Eurocentric post-critique ideas (Latour 2004; Felski 2015). Rita Felski, for instance, has called for the end of critique ("suspicious reading" in her words) and the recognition of forms of reading that include attachment and enchantment (2015, 2-17). At the core of this proposal is the separation of aesthetics and politics as if colonialism has truly ended, authoritarianism does not exist, and propaganda is a thing of the past. Elam, however, makes reading-as-critique relevant again. By revisiting the work of anticolonial thinkers who "unequivocally refused to think politics and aesthetics as separate" (9), a significant goal is achieved: Eurocentric theory has tended to construct the anticolonial thinker vis-à-vis itself; but "it is historically inaccurate and theoretically inadequate to suggest that anticolonial thought was either 'for' or 'against' liberalism" (14). The emancipative potentials of de-coupling the colonial context from the colonial power through inconsequentiality is immense: it removes the methodological impediments to doing comparative studies of "southern" contexts without the mediation of Europe.

Unknown/Unknowable Writing

If reading is conceptualized this way, then writing must change, too, but this leads to an acute sense of contradiction for authors who live under authoritarian rule. If inconsequential reading dismisses the position of the author, then it poses the permanent temptation of giving up on writing – on being an author, a counter-authority. The angst is rooted in the impossibility of political change which renders writing inconsequential, and tends to become self-destructive. What, then, does it mean to write under political strife and how can this problem be tackled?

We are so used to contemporary ideas of reading and writing that it is easy to forget why poets and writers wrote before the rise of the market as the regulating principle of literature,

or why, even today, others keep imagining and creating worlds even though their work rarely reaches beyond a limited audience. Writing today, it seems, is tied to values of practicality offered by capital or prestige; outside and beyond that, it has become increasingly impossible to think of writing for its own sake, or for thinking about the world as otherwise. In fact, the expansion of literary markets has ironically shrunk possibilities: is there any value in writing that is not for institutional World Literature?

Just as anticolonial reading bypasses authority, the "colonial" expert reading of a text from a colonized context can disrupt the authority of anticolonial writer. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Elam argues, has been overshadowed by Sartre's preface. This is one of the intellectual tensions in anticolonial struggles: Fanon's text is open to be read, understood, and appreciated by a global audience, but the desire for the institutionalization of a particular reading through authority confines the open text. By placing the white French man as the primary, perhaps exclusive, audience of the book (2), Sartre unwittingly claims exclusive authority over the text's following interpretations: if Fanon was not speaking to the world, then the world was not in the position to interpret his text, hence ironically removing Fanon from World Literature.

This, however, is precisely how writing becomes a resistance strategy: "we might celebrate Fanon's ability to speak to his fellow anticolonial comrades while remaining largely unintelligible to his colonizer" (2). Writing on the fringes of any Empire is characterized by its own *unknowing* status (it will not inhabit the future it imagines) as well as its *unknowability* (it will not be understood by the dominant position). In both, inconsequentiality is key because revolutionary writing "demand[s] that we reconsider our impulse toward evaluation on the grounds of political 'recognition,' 'success' (or 'failure'), 'sustainability,' and 'consequentiality'" (14). The kind of literature that aspires for recognition as such will ultimately fail to counter the hegemonic oppressive system. Only texts that are misunderstood – are unknown and unknowable – by the dominant position are worth celebrating in anticolonial political aesthetics.

Elam takes this revolutionary idea of writing without a consequence to the wider world. The world is, after all, the only thing the revolutionary thinker has: in the conclusion to his work, Fanon writes "now is the time to decide to change sides" and calls upon his comrades to "leave this Europe" and "look for something else" (Fanon 2004 [1963], 235, 236). The margins of European Empires might have been characterized by *unknowing* and *unknowability*, but they are not doomed to insignificance. Writing in the periphery becomes a potent hub of resistance where critique shifts its place to emerge in the figure of the exile, the emigre, the refugee, the displaced thinker whose life – resisting absorption in the dominant structure – leaves the present for other discoveries and new displacements. Stop and leave: disrupt and continue.

Empires tend to project an image of their own continuity through displays of permanence – monuments, institutions, and cultural products. However, writing capable of true critique with revolutionary potentials emerges not in the moment of translation and mobility – as World Literature theories often assume – but in the moment of "Stopping, quitting, leaving, and exiting" (124). This is, once again, where aesthetics and politics are merged to describe the way writing outside the networks of imperial World Literature functions: its consequence is not in achieving "success" that the liberal structure provides, but in establishing the

trajectory for imagining the world as otherwise. Beyond the world of literature, revolutionary historical figures – Moses, Mohammad, Salman the Persian, James Baldwin, among many others – also built on "'the virtues of exit' as a mode of political refusal and a demand for politics to be otherwise" (124).

And this is a clue to the other World Literature: refusing to read the colonized context in relation to the colonizer, writing becomes valuable not for the glory it might gain in the established normalized order created from a center but for its ability to offer alternative views of the world. The world of the wretched of the earth is not defined by continuity but rather by a discontinuity that is integral to colonial capitalism: "Anticolonial thought was written in exile, on deathbeds, in abjection, or in the face of 'declined experience'" (3-4). But under these circumstances writing is valuable because in the absence of the possibility of political action, it gives meaning to imagination where a different world brews. The impermanence of anticolonial writing is "not accountable to regimes of recognition but rather to the time being, the passing moment, and the final instance" (119). Revolutionary thinking, writes Elam, is therefore anti-nihilistic, because it is defiant in the face of the circumstances, and anti-future, because it will not see the future it imagines, a future that may or may never arrive.

Defiant Texts

Under extreme political strife, only imagination remains: the most subversive act of a revolutionary thinker, writing from the periphery of a power structure, is to envision a future they will probably never see. Revolutionary writers who are denied existence in World Literature – or even national literature – dare imagine "*impossibility* and *inconsequentiality* as rubrics for antiauthoritarian projects" (8). Writing from a specifically Iranian perspective, I find Elam's conceptualization of writing profoundly inspiring: it responds to the question of whether there is value in writing under colonial authoritarianism, and whether marginal authors are destined to be forgotten by the opulence and glory created to systematically and deliberately deny them due recognition.

One of the most powerful statements about the value of writing under extreme political strife is embodied in the figure of Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944). He kept writing poetry as he was fearlessly facing his end in Auschwitz, refusing to submit to the bureaucratized regime of fear and murder. The discovery of his notebook years later in a mass grave is testimony to what Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) wrote in *Master and Margarita* – another text published decades after the author's death – that "manuscripts don't burn" (1967, 344). To write poetry when one is subjected to political brutality is to remain faithful in a future one may never see: this idea of writing, and reading, is utterly different from institutionalized forms in which the acts are prized if they serve particular ends in the present. Similarly, when Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951) wrote *Tup-e Morvari* (*The Peal Cannon*) – written in 1948 and published posthumously in 1978 for the first time – he knew that its publication would be impossible: writing against the grain of Eurocentric nationalism and authoritarianism, the novel challenges European narratives of world history through parodic historical narratives to expose the inhumanity of their "conquests" and demystify the legacies of colonial empires. The makers of the other World Literature, therefore, always know that their audience is waiting in the future.

World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics, therefore, presents "the other" World Literature and enters the history of ideas along with anticolonial thinkers it discusses. Visiting the work of revolutionary thinkers, an idea of world literature is set in motion that boldly disrupts institutionalized literariness to make reading-as-critique relevant; it shifts the focus of World Literature from the moment of translation and transfer to the moment of defiance and refusal to be coopted into the system; and it challenges postcolonial theory – and its inherent Eurocentrism – by merging politics and aesthetics in analysis, resisting expert authority through comparative philology, a mode of reading that gives access to the wider world without subjecting the reader to authority.

And here is the added value: inconsequential reading and writing might seem something of the past, but in a time dubbed the "Asian century," it activates critique and renders an impossibility possible: the de-institutionalized World Literature creates a space for its re-institutionalization, outside the Eurocentric history of ideas, along with new possibilities for an emerging intellectual tradition that will be, like Auerbach's *Ansatzpunkte*, a starting moment for us to meet our new challenges. Anticolonial writing could not end by the establishment of national independence as authoritarianism had to be actively challenged. It is now time to move beyond the postcolonial world to reflect on emancipation from forthcoming homogenizing and oppressive forces – national, regional, and global – in the present century. The revolution and the quest for emancipation has not ended for comrades in discontinuity.

References

Alejandro, Audrey. 2017. "Eurocentrism, Ethnocentrism, and Misery of Position." *European Review of International Studies* 4(1): 5-20.

Bulgakov, Mikhail. 1967. *Master and Margarita*. Translated by Michael Glenny. London: Collins and Harvill Press.

Del Pino-Díaz, Fermín. 2022. "Alexander von Humboldt, writer and reader of Hispanic travels: Postcolonial Eurocentrism or intertextual alterity?" *Investigaciones Sociales* 46: 85-103.

Fanon, Frantz. 2004 [1963]. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Felski, Rita. 2015. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Fløistad, Guttorm, ed. 2007. "Introduction." In *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey, Volume 9: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*. Dordrecht: Springer, 1-24.

Hedayat, Sadegh. 2008 [1948]. *Tup-e Morvari* (*The Pearl Cannon*). Introduction and annotations by Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub. Stockholm: Arash Förlag.

Latour, Bruno. 2004. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter): 225-248.

Thumala Olave, María Angélica, ed. 2022. *The Cultural Sociology of Reading: The Meaning of Reading and Books Across the World*. New York: Springer.

About the Authors

Omid Azadibougar is Professor of Comparative Literature at Foreign Studies College of Hunan Normal University, China. He is the author of *The Persian Novel: Ideology, Fiction and Form in the Periphery* (Brill 2014) and *World Literature and Hedayat's Poetics of Modernity* (Palgrave-Macmillan 2020). He is also a co-editor of *Persian Literature as World Literature* (Bloomsbury 2021) and a co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Global Comparative Literature* (forthcoming).

How to Cite

Azadibougar, Omid. May 19, 2023. "Comrades in Discontinuity: The Makers of the Other World Literature." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Abolfazl Ahangari | May 19, 2023

In his introduction to *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* (2020), J. Daniel Elam remarks that the epilogue to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)"is *a call to abandon Europe*, its mad rush toward total slaughter" (3). *The Wretched of the Earth* obviously has played a key role in the formation of the central idea of this book — it appears in full in Elam's title. But we might look back and re-think this description after reading Elam's own epilogue. There, he reminds us that "Fanon died before Algerian independence," and then draws our attention to the harsh reality that "the colonial world will outlive us, too" (114).[1] Elam's book, along with Fanon's, is a call for abandoning Europe, for ending the mad rush toward total slaughter, for thinking and acting otherwise, while knowing that it will be most likely impossible and Europe "will outlive us too" (114).

But methodologically speaking, this project is quite different from Fanon's book. Although you may sense that Elam and Fanon share the same rage, unlike Fanon, Elam has no intention of providing an answer to the question of colonialism in any clear sense.[2] To me, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* fully belongs to the present, or more specifically, the globalization of the Global North. The book's significance lies in its relevance to the current intellectual climate of the twenty-first century. Its subject matter, anticolonialism, once a vital political discourse of the Global South aimed at securing national liberation, has become increasingly obsolete in the postmodern era. Nonetheless, the book's scholarly analysis of this discourse reminds us that academia continues to preserve the rich historical legacy of this discourse. By returning to the anticolonial discourses of the early and mid-twentieth century, Elam starts *an intellectual journey* toward rethinking academic humanities, for relocating the self as a scholar in the humanities by delinking from its colonial and authoritarian structure of power and offering an alternative, while knowing that it is impossible.[3]

This journey is made possible through the work of Erich Auerbach. In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), as Elam points out, Auerbach takes a journey "through 'Western Literature,' offering plenty of asides and personal commentary along the way" (126). This journey has gradually given him the will to "survive fascism [and

subsequently any other form of authoritarianism or mastery],” if not to resist it (4). Similarly, Elam also takes a journey to colonial India. Along with Auerbach, akin to Beatrice’s role in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, he begins an odyssey for self-recognition as a literary scholar and cultural historian: in each of the four chapters, he meets an Indian anticolonialist — Lala Har Dayal, B.R Ambedkar, M.K Gandhi, and Bhagat Singh — and provides a space for each of them to articulate themselves in and for the present as the theorist of anticolonial reading. This intellectual journey has led him to paradoxically resign from his authorial role and find himself as an “inexpert” and “immature” reader. This quest for “self-erasure” may seem factually impossible for him as the author of *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth*, but not impossible at the level of imagination — since anticolonialism “relies on imagination … to imagine radical, pessimistic but utopian” (10).

Being a reader, for Elam, is a decolonial option. To him, if “British authorship was the mechanism of British colonial authority” (ix), anticolonial reading, as it is elaborately discussed through four Indian anticolonialists, was about envisioning “the possibility of egalitarian emancipation” (ix). Being a reader, one among millions of other readers, was offering them a chance to coexist with others (5). To be or to become a reader was to imagine alternative endings that left mastery undone and structures of power unravelled, rather than simply replaced. By training as a comparative philologist, Elam knows that in *Mimesis*, Auerbach is consciously not taking the position of an author but a reader. While reading Western literary texts, he brilliantly notes that Auerbach is finding himself, “[p]erhaps Auerbach finds himself in Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay, overwhelmed with books neither she nor he had read” (129). Auerbach repeatedly rediscovers himself in the process of reading Western literary texts and *coexisting* with the literary personages; and it represents a possible way for him to survive fascism — more precisely, to stand against European post-enlightenment *individualism* which had gradually led to the formation of Fascism and Nazism in Europe.

This radical egalitarian and communal view, Elam notes, “emerged not from within Europe,” and accordingly, remains “largely unintelligible” to Europeans as colonizers (3).[4] In his “master class” introduction, to employ Ramsey McGlazer’s phrase, he beautifully demonstrates how Fanon remains unintelligible to Sartre. If Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* by having in mind “the wretched” or “the colonized” as the interlocutor, Sartre sought to make it intelligible for Europeans, to change the interlocutor and to warn the colonizers. According to Elam, Sartre unintentionally misinterprets Fanon’s egalitarian violence aimed at standing against the colonial legal violence and putting an end to “the horrors of its [i.e., European colonial] oppressive rule around the world” as “masochistically bloodthirsty,” and as “actual crime and murder” (3, 2). As a response to Sartre, by looking back to the Ranganathan’s second law, Elam remarks “Every Reader His Book” (vii). That is, it was Sartre’s great mistake to translate/interpret Fanon’s words for European audiences, to impose his interpretation on readers, and to not let the book be read by European readers free from Sartre’s authority as an expert. While Sartre assumed the *authority* to write a preface and summarize the book, Elam quests for returning to philology as “the art of reading slowly” (4).[5] More precisely, by emphasizing reading as the moment of experiencing “immersion of the self in the ephemeral” (to put it in Bargi’s words), and refusing “the expertise, and therefore sovereignty,” Elam undermines the authorial role of Sartre as a post-enlightenment total subject (x). In this respect, I believe, *World Literature for the Wretched of*

the Earth is warning Europeans to "disavow mastery" and to "remain a reader" of world literature (ix): Elam's disavowal of European individualism for the sake of non-European egalitarianism is aimed at making possible "the transition from despotic rule to democracy and freedom" (x).

The Essays

In the first review essay of this forum, the author emphasizes the question of World Literature. Omid Azadibougar in "Comrades in Discontinuity: The Makers of the Other World Literature" considers Elam's *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* as a possible option for decolonizing the institution of World Literature and its formation as a global category in Western academia. He wisely notes that this book "shifts the focus of World Literature from the moment of translation and transfer to the moment of defiance and refusal to be coopted into the system."

In the second and third essays, Dilip M. Menon and Drishadwati Bargi examine Elam's anticolonial theory of reading in two different ways. Menon in "Reading for the Future," by emphasizing the concept of future, strongly pushes back against the idea of inconsequentialist reading. To him, an inconsequential act of reading primarily eschews an idea of the future. On the other side, in her "Readers of the Impossible Present," Bargi focuses on reading as "fundamentally a de-idealizing experience" through which the subject encounters "immersion of the self in the ephemeral" and "the contingent and the uncertainties of the present." This self-effacement (putting aside the subject's self-mastery), Bergi notes, is necessary for the appearance of "revolutionary virtue, a practice that is not different from sacrificial love."

In the fourth essay, "The Politics of the Impossible," Ajay Skaria focuses on the question of impossibility, as one of the central themes of Elam's book, and rereads it along with the notion of "the minor [as an equivalent for 'the wretched of the earth']." The minor, as Skaria points out, is "not a majority in waiting" but "the sense of embodying practices, beliefs, or even a way of being that is at odds with the norms dominant in society;" and Elam's monograph is "a very subtle and nuanced exploration of the politics of the minor as practiced by four figures who were quite prominent in Indian politics." In other words, each of these four Indian anticolonialists, by recognizing the self as the minor, has made it possible for acting the impossible.

In his "Impossible Professions," the last review essay of this collection, Ramsey McGlazer considers Elam's book as an anticolonial response to the question of academic humanities in the "neoliberal universities in the Global North." He beautifully reads this book as an author's quest for decolonizing Western academia and notes:

> If the neoliberal university remains, with exceptions, 'a society of individuals … whose only wealth is individual thought,' Elam calls for the decolonization of this society, and he does so by studying those who spoke the 'words outlawed' under colonial rule: 'Brother, sister, friend.' This is not often what's meant by decolonizing the university or the curriculum, but Elam's book shows compellingly that any decolonization worthy of the name would need to include, or perhaps begin with, a transformation of subjectivity, an alteration of the 'imperious' habits that we have learned, the hierarchizing styles of

thought that we have internalized and reproduced.

This, I believe, is an ideal end to a beginning.

References

Auerbach, Erich. 2003. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Elam, Daniel. 2020. *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics*. New York: Fordham Press.

---

[1] Similarly, Har Dayal and Bhagat Singh also have never found a chance to see Indian independence, and Gandhi "lived to see Indian independence, but it was not the swaraj he had imagined" (115).

[2] The Fanonian rage or anger here has nothing to do with colonial violence. It has to be perceived, along with the Weberian conception of the state as legitimate violence, as an act of resisting the imposed law which legitimizes the injustice and inhumanity — or more specifically, for putting an end to violence, for the mad rush toward total slaughter.

[3] Ramsey McGlazer thoroughly develops this aspect in his review essay "Impossible Professions."

[4] 'The colonizer' is not the one who colonizes, but part of the greater history in which the colonizing mentality is formed.

[5] Following Isabel Hofmeyr, Elam notes that "reading slow" is also a Gandhian practice, but it has to be reminded that "Gandhi's "slow reading" is not pitted against "fast reading," but rather "reading towards mastery." See p. 161.

About the Authors

Abolfazl Ahangari is a third-year Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong. His dissertation titled *The Return: A Poetical Theology* explores the question of subjectivity in the postmodern condition from a politico-theological perspective.

How to Cite

Ahangari, Abolfazl. May 19, 2023. "Introduction: When the Impossible Knocks." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Monica Popescu | July 6, 2022

In 2000, at the turn of the millennium, Aijaz Ahmad published an article that looks back at Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's "The Communist Manifesto" through the prism of its engagement with the concept of "world literature."[1] At the time of his writing the article, world literature as a field was taking off with renewed energy, after waxing and waning in popularity since the nineteenth century. The previous year, Pascale Casanova had published *La République mondiale des Letters* (1999), which was translated into English as *The World Republic of Letters* in 2004.[2] In the early years of the millennium David Damrosch published *What Is World Literature?* (2003), while Franco Moretti's conversation-starting short article "Conjectures on World Literature" also came out in 2000.[3] The feverishness which accompanied the field's rapid expansion points to a historical turning point, the importance of which we can glean from Ahmad's close reading of Marx and Engels's essay and of the political and economic context in which his article emerged.[4]

Ahmad reads "The Communist Manifesto" as an engagement with the role of capitalism that, for Marx and Engels, was marked by a certain amount of ambivalence. Capitalism was both the worst thing that had happened in human history (as its depredations, both in the West and especially in the Global South, attest) as well as a reluctantly acknowledged breath of fresh air that shook up the stagnant feudal economic system and its attending political relations. Capitalism expanded on a global scale — connecting distant territories as a result of extraction of raw materials, manufacturing, and trade — and consequently spread the purview of its relations of exploitation. However, according to Ahmad, Marx and Engels observed two slightly positive effects to the largely deleterious effects of globalization. First, national approaches to the economy had to give way to global ways of conceiving manufacture and trade. That was a negative change because it carried capitalism across the globe, but also a positive development because it shook off the confining attitudes of nationalism. Nationalism, according to Marx and Engels, was associated with narrow-mindedness. Also, intellectuals from different countries (which for Marx and Engels, like Goethe before them, entail mostly Western European states) came to be connected beyond national frames, in what Goethe had called "world literature." Marx and Engels hoped that world literature could become a progressive force within the socialist project. Ahmad restated Marx and Engels's argument and formulated the problems that a retrospective understanding of the connections between capitalism and colonialism revealed:

The problem lay elsewhere, in the assumption that the globalization of the capitalist mode of production would itself perform this historic task of ensuring that a universalist culture of common aspiration would prevail over national or local "narrow-mindedness": the assumption, in other words, that there was some direct, one-to-one relationship between "world-market" and "world-literature" which could somehow be accommodated within the socialist project as a progressive force. The methodological problem, of course is that both the "world market" and "world literature" are viewed here as unified wholes without internal tensions and contradictions, and as the polar opposites of "national economy" and "local and national literatures," so that the rise of one pole, presumes the demise of the other. (Ahmad 17–18)

Ahmad then proceeds to show all the numerous ways in which colonialism in a country like India had made it impossible for representatives of "Indian literature" to transcend the level of the nation and circulate with equal ease on the global literary circuits as British literature

texts. Ahmad states that (cultural) colonization and later the rise of postcolonial literatures in English did not produce world literature but simply placed English literature in a position of domination over local literatures. His argument ought to be studied carefully to see the extent to which the examples he gives from India are reproduced in other former colonies.

But this is not the point that I want to make about Ahmad's article. As I mentioned earlier, Ahmad's article was published in 2000, at a moment when the field of world literature was emerging (or reemerging) with robust conversations. From within that moment, Ahmad could not really see the relevance of that field-defining period or its relation to geopolitical shifts. It is only retrospectively, two decades later, that we can see the similarity between the mid-ninetieth century moment when Marx and Engels wrote their article and the turn of the millennium when Ahmad and other scholars returned, some with cautious optimism others with outright sanguinity, to the idea of world literature. If Marx and Engels hoped that world literature would forge cultural alliances beyond the narrow-mindedness of national perspectives and contribute to the socialist project, the recent supporters of the concept likewise expressed hopes for the intellectual connections forged by world literature.

While most scholars — Casanova and Moretti in particular — were not blinded to the relation between globalization, the global spread of capitalism, and world literature, they nonetheless must have seen world literature as one of the few positive aspects that even globalization could engender. After all, the 1990s had seen the end of the Cold War-era fragmentation into First, Second, and Third Worlds. Likewise, the aesthetic world-systems that I described *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War*, generated by the Eastern Bloc and the West, which ascribed literary value differently and defined the function of writers and literature in contrary ways, slipped into a semblance of unity (or at least uniformity).[5] The rise of interest in world literature in the first two decades of the new millennium is the symptom of the historical transformations taking place both in geopolitical terms and of the rearrangement of aesthetic systems after the Cold War. Such important paradigm shifts in the study of culture are privileged vantage points from where we can peek into the past and distinguish the constitutive political, social, and cultural forces that shape cultural production.

While my focus in *At Penpoint* has been on the intersection between decolonization processes and the geopolitical and cultural landscapes produced by the Cold War, in the Conclusion I allude to the rise of the world literature paradigm as a research field. As I argue above, the effervescence around this concept over the past two decades gives us a vantage point from which we can look both into the past as well as at current transformations. The scholarship of Kerry Bystrom, Elizabeth Holt, Lauren Horst, Mathias Orhero, Carolyn Ownbey, Jini Kim Watson, and Mingqing Yuan published in this roundtable takes hold of this vantage point in order to reconsider essential elements of the changing cultural landscape over the past seventy years. I am extremely grateful for the insights they draw out from my work as well as for the opportunities which their own research open. If we shift the attention slightly from the Cold War to its aftermath and the rise of the world literature paradigm, their work illuminates methodologies in the study of world literature, from questions of comparability (Ownbey, Yuan) to questions of scale (Orhero), and from the relation between forms of imperialism and cultural production (Watson, Holt, Ownbey, Horst) to the financial mechanisms undergirding cultural production (Holt, Horst, Orhero).

Take for instance Carolyn Ownbey's comparison of two dissident writers — Mongane Wally Serote (South Africa) and Václav Havel (Czechoslovakia). She makes a compelling case for comparisons between artists embedded within the two Cold War aesthetic world-systems, urging us to consider the similarities and differences between writers who opposed the state machinery in South Africa and in Czechoslovakia. Her work makes visible the different types of imperialism at work across the world and within the two world-systems. In South Africa, the Black and Coloured population were subjected to "colonialism of a special type," whereby the metropolis and the colony lived side by side yet separated by segregation, disparity in ownership of means of production and political power.[6] This form of oppression was historically layered on top of the forms of imperialism and colonialism Western powers had exercised over the Southern part of the African continent. Within the Eastern Bloc, the satellite countries within the USSR's orbit were also subjected to a form of imperialism, marked by the imposition of the Soviet political, economic, and cultural system.[7] Without the clarity offered by Ownbey's comparison we would be unable to understand why, in 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is perceived differently by some governments in the Global South than their counterparts in Eastern Europe and the West. If for Eastern European countries Russia's aggression appears as a continuation of its earlier forms of imperialism, for many governments in the Global South, the Soviet Union's former opposition to Western forms of imperialism and support for liberation struggles translates into a more sympathetic or at least ambivalent approach to Russia.[8] As Lauren Horst argues with her astute interpretation of Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Our Sister Killjoy*, we can read our way through Cold War-era literature by attending to the relations of "seduction—romantic, ideological, and otherwise" between former and current superpowers, on the one hand, and avowedly non-aligned Third World (or contemporary Global South).

The longevity of cultural affiliations developed during the Cold War, such as the Afro-Asian solidarity networks that Mingqing Yuan explores in her discussion of Kofi Awoonor's travels to China, is also visible in post-Cold War aesthetic choices. As Mathias Orhero argues, minority poets from the Niger Delta choose a "hybrid realist mode" with a focus on the themes of resistance and revolution in order to oppose "the politics of modernism and its association with multinational oil capitalists and the so-called economic core nations that have destroyed their region through reckless and unsustainable oil exploration and extraction" as well as "the Nigerian state whose derivative and asymmetrical nationalism and neocolonial tendencies." Although no longer under sway of or fighting against the Cold War aesthetic world-systems promoted by the two superpowers, minority Nigerian writers continue to dissociate themselves from literary forms promoted in the West.

Orhero poignantly brings to the foreground the role of oil and the forms of domination conjoined with its extraction in creating not only political fault lines but also cultural and aesthetic divides. Elizabeth Holt's ideas-packed article looks back to the Cold War period and draws connections between the in-house publications of international petroleum companies, the writers for these publications and their penchant for Western modernist literature, the invisible role of oil in carrying around and connecting the intellectuals convened at conferences and events sponsored by organizations like the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), and the more visible funding of CCF magazines with money from oil adds. In the context of the unfolding war in Ukraine, which highlighted the dependence large swathes of the world have on Russian fossil fuels, one wonders what forms of cultural sponsorship and

relations between oil, imperialism, and literary production we will be able eventually to uncover? How are we going to read the relation between contemporary world literature and world-changing events like Russia's aggression of Ukraine?

Although analyzing different cultural contexts and historical moments, Holt and Orhero demonstrate the importance and usefulness of "theory from the South," to borrow the title of Jean and John Comaroff's book.[9] In her contribution which focuses on new methodological and theoretical paradigms, Jini Kim Watson brilliantly observes that "the dominance of both US military power and US knowledge apparatuses has occluded [East and Southeast Asia] as a site that *produces* Cold War theorizing." She proceeds to present three productive directions which scholars have taken to destabilize the West's domination of knowledge production about East and Southeast Asia. We can expand her observations to think how the rise of the world literature paradigm over the past two decades can be theorized from ex-centric perspectives that move beyond Eurocentric models.

---

[1] Aijaz Ahmad, "The Communist Manifesto and 'World Literature,'" in *Social Scientist* 28.7–8 (July–August 2000): 3–30.

[2] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* translated by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004).

[3] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature? (*Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003); Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," in *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68.

[4] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Communist Manifesto with Related Documents*, edited and introduction by John E. Towes (Bedford: St-Martins, 1999).

[5] Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War* (Durham: Duke UP, 2020).

[6] The South African Communist Party's 1962 program "The Road to South African Freedom," launched the thesis of apartheid as colonialism of a special type, presenting the South African situation as a case of an oppressing minority group, "the white nation," subjugating the majority of the population.

[7] For Russian imperialism, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001), and Harsha Ram,*The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2003).

[8] For an explanation of several African governments' hesitation to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, see Hilary Lynd, "The Politics of Imperial Gratitude," *Africa Is A Country* (March 14, 2022).

[9] Jean and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2011).

About the Authors

Monica Popescu is Associate Professor and William Dawson Scholar of African Literatures in the Department of English at McGill University. She is the author of *South African Literature beyond the Cold War* and *The Politics of Violence in Post-communist Films*. Her most recent book, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War*(Duke UP, 2020) was named the 2022 African Literature Association Book of the Year. The book also won an Honorable Mention for the Scaglione Prize in Comparative Literature conferred by the Modern Language Association and was named one of the CHOICE Outstanding Academic Titles for 2021.

How to Cite

Popescu, Monica. July 6, 2022. "Historical Vantage Points: The Rise of the World Literature Paradigm." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Jini Kim Watson | July 6, 2022

Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* brilliantly diagnoses the fragmentation of postcolonial studies and Cold War studies, showing how the former has often only attended to neocolonial relations of the Third World to the West, and ignored "the competition between Western and Eastern Bloc forms of imperialism."[1] Focusing specifically on the effects on African literature during the Cold War, the book ends with several profound questions for scholarship more generally: "what if the knowledge paradigms specific to the global conflict linger on, shaping the intellectual instruments we use to explain literary phenomena today? What if the impact of the two world-systems persists beyond the demise of one of the superpowers, manifesting itself in the triumph of neoliberal capitalism and the preservation of the West's cultural and aesthetic structures?"[2]

With a focus on East and Southeast Asia, this short essay takes its cue from *At Penpoint* in order to survey some recent scholarly frames that self-reflectively and critically interrogate the Cold War's lingering "intellectual instruments" and "cultural and aesthetic structures." Before examining those frames, we should first note that the study of this region, in contrast to Africa, has been *overdetermined* by Cold War "hot conflicts": the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the standoff between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, as well as lesser-known bipolar violence such as the counterinsurgency campaigns against the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, the Malayan Emergency of 1948–1960, and the 1965 bloodletting in Indonesia. At the same time, with some important exceptions, literatures from these areas have only recently been admitted into the purview of postcolonial studies, which has usually taken South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean as its paradigmatic sites. Moreover, while East and Southeast Asia have been paramount to studies *of* the Cold War, the dominance of both US military power and US knowledge apparatuses has occluded the region as a site that *produces* Cold War theorizing. In what follows I look briefly at three recent disciplinary formations that, in different ways, seek to address these intersecting legacies of power and knowledge. They are: Heonik Kwon's notion of the "Other Cold War"; the emerging field of

transpacific studies; and the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies project. My goal is not to adjudicate the "right" path, but, inspired by Popescu's work, to reflect on varying critical approaches to the deep intellectual imprint of the Cold War in studies of East and Southeast Asia.

I begin with Heonik Kwon's 2010 book *The Other Cold War*. Kwon, an anthropologist at Cambridge University whose work focuses on contemporary Korea and Vietnam, makes a number of keen interventions in this important and lucidly written work, of which I'll address just two. The first is directed at mainstream Cold War historiography, which has often posited the conflict as an "imaginary war" or a "long peace" in the EuroAmerican theater. Arguing that the Cold War is not a "unitary historical reality," *The Other Cold War* stresses the "presence or absence of mass human death and suffering in the collective memory of the cold war."[3] Kwon continues: "in societies that experienced the cold war as a total war or other forms of organized violence, the history of political bipolarization is analytically inseparable from the social memory of mass death and the morality of death remembrance" (121). This perceptual antagonism, between on the one hand the Cold War as "imaginary" — the superpower standoff that never erupted into war — and, on the other hand, the Cold War as total war and mass death, is precisely what someone like Don Mee Choi has explored in in her two companion poetry collections *Hardly War* (2016) and *DMZ Colony* (2020). As poetic meditations on the Korean War and the ensuing neocolonial power structures on the peninsula, these works aptly describe the epistemological bifurcation of the Cold War. The Korean War was simultaneously a bloody conflagration that killed three million and, to quote *Hardly War*, "It was hardly war, the hardliest of wars."[4]

Kwon's second intervention is his critique of postcolonial studies for the way it hews to the EuroAmerican view of the Cold War, missing the role of the "novel imperial order of the Cold War" in complicating decolonizing projects in the Third World.[5] He especially takes issue with accounts of colonial modernity by prominent postcolonial theorists Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee. Writing of those influential theories that aimed to "provincialize" Europe and pluralize modernity, Kwon observes that in these critiques "there are no traces of a modern Europe as we know it; that is, the Europe that, after experiencing a catastrophic war, was divided into mutually hostile forces in an undeclared ideological war."[6]

> Empire in the second half of the twentieth century was not the same entity as the Europe we know from colonial history, and the transition from one to the other was coincidental with some of the most violent events experienced in Africa and Asia. Whereas decolonization and political bipolarization were concurrent processes in much of the non-Western world . . . the scholarship of postcolonial criticism relegates the political history of the cold war to an analytical void (130).

Much postcolonial scholarship, therefore, has misapprehended its object of critique by ignoring the fundamental transformation of empire during the Cold War/decolonizing conjuncture. Kwon further argues that the emphasis on neutrality and the role of the Non-Aligned Movement fails to describe the historical realities of the era since "the majority of postcolonial states were obliged in one way or another, to participate in bipolar politics" (176). I would wager that part of the reason East and Southeast Asian cultural production has formed so little of the postcolonial canon is precisely because of this differential relationship to empire: one cannot think of postcolonial Korea of Vietnam, for example, only in vertical relation to their erstwhile colonizers Japan and France. Like Popescu, Kwon's work makes

visible the dual framework necessary for grasping the *postcolonial* Cold War. By rethinking the epistemology of "cold" in "Cold War," Kwon shifts the focus in postcolonial studies from the "Europe we know from [South Asian] colonial history" to the transformed imperial power — and the role of the United States — in the Cold War period.

The role of the United States is key to the second disciplinary formation I turn to: Janet Hoskin and Viet Thanh Nguyen's 2014 volume *Transpacific Studies,* which announces its field-clearing purpose in its subtitle "Framing an Emerging Field."[7] Positioning itself at the "juncture of area studies, American Studies, and Asian American studies," the project is less pitted against the blind spots of postcolonial studies, and more of those of the US institutional formations of Asian Studies, on the one hand, and American and Asian American studies on the other.[8] Transpacific studies seeks to challenge the hegemony of economic and political visions of "the Pacific" by attending to processes and subjectivities left out of its remit, and interrogating the way that "legacies of imperialism, militarization and colonization" (3) have profoundly shaped the region. In their introduction the authors carefully unpack the links between Cold War bipolarity, the production of so-called Asian miracle economies, and the movement of refugees across the Pacific to underscore the *unevenness* of transpacific flows. Postcolonialism itself is a highly uneven phenomenon since "Asian memories of liberation and decolonization may efface efforts by some contemporary Asian peoples to colonize weaker ones" (9). Referencing not only the Japanese colonization and occupation of much of Asia and the Pacific, they also note "South Korean military participation in the United States' Vietnam War, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978, and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979" (9–10). Transpacific studies is a project, then, that takes seriously the ways that Area Studies and Asian American Studies have often produced partial visions of the region, separating out the complexities of regional decolonization and Cold War-backed developmentism from the arrival of Asians in the US. Hoskins and Nguyen thus provocatively call for an "examination of the immigration experience that is as concerned with the *sending* countries as the receiving ones" (19).

As a consequence, a major contribution of Hoskin and Nguyen's work is their acute self-reflectiveness about the disciplinary and institutional power dynamics of the various scholarly apparatuses that have studied Asia. Critical of the way Area Studies was often organized around US security and economic interests, Hoskins and Nguyen offer transpacific studies as a model that "can illuminate the traffic in peoples, cultures, capital and ideas between 'America' and 'Asia' as well as across the troubled ocean that lends its name to this model" (2). Alongside scrutiny of EuroAmerican Orientalist knowledge production, they also note the way postcolonial studies has privileged certain US-based diasporic academics, and how the cultural capital of US theory gets exported back to Asia through publishing networks and US-granted PhDs. As a counter, they outline a transpacific framework that would critically attend to how US Asian Studies, American Studies, and Asian Studies in Asia are often overdetermined by the massive institutional and economic might of the US. Even after its so-called "transnational turn" in the early 2000s, American Studies can still marginalize other sites: "even a post-Cold War, anti-imperialist American Studies could assert either an intellectual imperialism or an insistence on the United States as the primary object of inquiry" (20). For all its subtle field self-reflections, however, we might note that the transpacific is a framework that still centers the Asia-United States relationship over a more complex, comparative notion of global politics and tensions.

The third and final critical framework I examine, the Inter-Asian Cultural Studies project (hereafter IACS), is equally spurred by a critical reflection on institutional hierarchies. Kuan-hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat, prominent cultural theorists from Taiwan and Singapore respectively, describe the origins of the project in their introduction to the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader* published by Routledge in 2007. What began as a set of conferences in the late 1990s was followed by the establishment of the journal *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* in 2000, the IACS society in 2004, and the regular IACS conferences which are now held biannually in different cities in Asia. This network began, Chen and Chua write, with the recognition that the "hegemony of the 'West as method' blocks the possibility of us looking towards relatively similar historical experiences shared in Asia, Latin American and Africa."[9] Since few pan-Asian scholarly networks existed, an editorial collective was formed to "tilt the unbalanced direction of the flow of knowledge through the existing infrastructure" (1). As Chen explains more thoroughly in his 2010 book *Asia as Method*, the point is to use Asian experiences and cultural production as reference points for each other, rather than constantly looking to the West. The question of bypassing the West has been central to the methodology of IACS: its journal was one of the "first pan-Asian international journals in Humanities and Social Sciences to publish and circulate quality interdisciplinary scholarly work . . . generated *directly* out of Asia" (2, italics added), and "inter-referencing" has now become a critical term in its own right. Such an emphasis occurs despite — or rather because of — the fact that many of the editorial collective were trained in the US or West, or have strong links to US, Canadian, and Australian academic formations, while the conferences and journal are all in English. (Both are facts that I, as a US-based academic, certainly benefit from.) The journal is now one of the most prestigious in the region, and the conferences ever larger and more vibrant.

Like the journal more broadly, the essays in the *Reader* are a lively mix of interdisciplinary and multi-sited inquiries. They address questions of theorizing "Asia," the ongoing dominance of the US in the region — its militarism, its cultures, its desirability — and the circulation and cross-pollination of Asian media, cinema, queer cultures, and social movements. But it is perhaps not surprising that the journal's focus, in its early years at least, tended to be essays from the economically developed "Asian Tiger" nations — South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore — plus China and India as rising powers. In other words, one of those "relatively similar shared historical experiences" that the West had blocked perception of was the US-aligned Cold War experience of postcolonial development. Indeed, we could argue that the project itself emerges as a post-Cold War effort to move beyond Cold War knowledge boundaries, even as it tends to partially reinscribe them. In recent years, the journal has expanded its remit to include more regional diversity, diasporic themes and translated work from less dominant languages; a special issue in 2011, for example, focused on Islamic feminism, and one in 2019 showcased the intellectual cross-pollination that occurs through Asian-American studies in Asia.

One might consider the inclusion of Hee-Yeon Cho's essay in the 2007 volume, "Revitalizing the Bandung Spirit," representative of the project's ambitious but sometimes contradictory efforts. In it, Cho, a sociologist at Sungkonghoe University, briefly surveys the vicissitudes of the decolonizing era: the brief optimistic moment of Bandung and the Non-aligned Movement, followed by the cooptation of most postcolonial states by authoritarian developmentism of either the capitalist or socialist stripe. In turn, "the overlapping processes

of democratization and globalization . . . drove the post-authoritarian regime [of the Third World] into the neo-liberal policy line."[10] The essay explicitly raises the question of how to think about the legacy of Third World dreams of non-alignment and solidarity in a region marked by ongoing Cold War stand-offs, uneven development, unresolved imperial resentments, as well as converging aspirations of Global Asia and the market socialism of China and Vietnam. Cho concludes, somewhat nostalgically, that, "We have to find a transnational commonality and transnational common solidarity based on it in the Bandung principle. This is what we have to revive in the Bandung declaration."[11] The invocation of Bandung clearly recalls the "initial impetus of Inter-Asia as a solidarity network" and the effort to push beyond Western Cold War knowledge paradigms and neoliberal orthodoxies.[12] And yet, despite devoting a journal issue in 2015 to "Bandung at 60," any potential for "reviving" the Bandung spirit remains decidedly mixed. In a 2016 article, Hilmar Farid notes that "none of the original objectives [of the Bandung Conference] has been achieved," and, in Asia especially, "today we witness competition through the imposition of low wages to create cheap labor, relaxation of investment laws, and the establishment of Export Processing Zones (EPZs)."[13] I have argued elsewhere that Cold War repression in Asia played an outsized role in what David Scott has called "liberalism's world-historical defeat of its principal Cold War political adversaries."[14] At its broadest, however, in "problematising Asia," IACS helps us think through our post-Cold War present in terms of its postcolonial, post-authoritarian, and globalizing cultural formations.[15] Reflecting less a unified methodology or political-social movement, it offers rather an array of interdisciplinary critical tools and analyses that respond to the region's contradictions.

Jodi Kim has insightfully noted that the Cold War unfolded not merely as a "historical epoch or event, but as itself a knowledge project or epistemology."[16] All three projects described above help us better understand the nature of those knowledge constructs and how they live on into our present. To be sure, none of the three approaches is perfect or entirely sufficient. Kwon's "other Cold War" does not explicitly offer a comparative lens for other parts of the world affected by the global Cold War; transpacific studies remains centered on the Asia/America relationship above all others; and inter-Asia grapples with its own centers and peripheries. But what we see, as I hope to have to have shown, is how all three projects productively grapple with formations of Cold War/postcolonial knowledge and inspire new thinking around the study of contemporary Asia, a region in which the Cold War continues to shape and subtend our globalized liberal order. As Popescu intuits, questioning "the triumph of neoliberal capitalism" — and the Cold War knowledge projects that linger within it — remains a paramount task.

---

[1] Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War* (Durham: Duke UP, 2020), 6.

[2] Ibid., 186.

[3] Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 121. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[4] Don Mee Choi, *Hardly War* (Seattle and New York: Wave, 2016), 6. See also Sunny Xiang's

rich analysis of Choi's poems in *Tonal Intelligence: The Aesthetics of Asian Inscrutability During the Long Cold War* (New York: Columbia UP, 2020).

[5] Heonik Kwon, "The Transpacific Cold War," in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, eds. Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen (Honolulu: Hawai'i UP, 2014), 69.

[6] Ibid., 76.

[7] See also Simon Fraser University's Institute for Transpacific Cultural Research: http://www.sfu.ca/itcr/about.html

[8] Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Introduction: Transpacific Studies: Critical Perspectives on an Emerging Field," in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, eds. Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen (Honolulu: Hawai'i UP, 2014), 24. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[9] Kuan-hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat, "The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies: Movements Project," in *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader,* eds. Kuan-hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat(London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 1. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[10] Cho Hee-Yeon, "Revitalizing the Bandung Spirit," in *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader,* eds. Kuan-hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat(London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 588.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Olivia Khoo, "Diaspora as Method: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies and the Asian Australian Studies Research Network," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2 (2019), 296.

[13] Hilmar Farid, "Rethinking the Legacies of Bandung," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016), 18.

[14] David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014), 138. See Jini Kim Watson, *Cold War Reckonings: Authoritarianism and the Genres of Decolonization* (New York: Fordham UP, 2021).

[15] Khoo, "Diaspora as Method," 292.

[16] Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Culture and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010), 8.

About the Authors

Jini Kim Watson is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at New York University where she teaches postcolonial literature and theory. She is the author of *Cold War Reckonings: Authoritarianism and the Genres of Decolonization* (Fordham UP, 2021) and *The New Asian City: Three-dimensional Fictions of Space and Urban Form* (Minnesota UP, 2011). She has also co-edited, with Gary Wilder, the collected volume, *The Postcolonial*

Contemporary: Political Imaginaries for the Global Present (Fordham UP, 2018).

How to Cite

Watson, Jini Kim. July 6, 2022. "Thinking Through the Other Cold War: Transpacific and Inter-Asia Approaches." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Mingqing Yuan | July 6, 2022

Monica Popescu's new book brings postcolonial studies under the "Cold War lens" to examine the latter's buried traces in African cultural productions.[1] It goes beyond the Cold War binary to emphasize African writers' autonomy and creativity in search for literary aesthetics. Even though it mentions fleetingly some African writers' engagements with Afro-Asian associations, however, it does not go deep into Africa's "writing with" Asia and Latin America. Current studies on the communist camp's cultural influence over Africa tend to focus on the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau (AAWB), in which China is positioned as a dominant influence in competition with the Soviet Union and the United States to win the "Third World."[2] This focus on China in another way ignores the agency and autonomy of African writers and nations in these interactions. Not intending to argue against China's influence over the AAWB Colombo office, this essay would like to call more attention to the active participation of other Afro-Asian writers and nations in these Afro-Asian interactions. The concentrated attention towards the AAWB can overlook other channels of exchanges and literary genres other than novels. This essay attempts to catch a glimpse into textual and writerly travels between West Africa and China in the early 1960s, using the example of Kofi Awoonor to examine aesthetic and interpersonal connections across different locations. It hopes to bring African poetry into the discussion of the cultural Cold War and unearth the dynamics and multifaced impacts of the Cold War on literary productions.

Most existing publications linking the Cold War and African literature focus on the dynamics and textual circulation of novels written in English, especially from established postcolonial writers. Other forms of travels in that era are not given enough attention, especially textual travels of poetry through oral performance. On August 25, Kofi Awoonor, still known as George Awoonor Williams, dressed up in traditional clothes and performed his poems *Black Eagle Awakens* with an African drum in a poetry recitation concert in Beijing.[3] The concert was organized by *Poetry* (Shikan), a national magazine established in 1957 focusing on poetry. Poets from Sudan, Vietnam, New Zealand, and Indonesia also read their poems, followed by battle songs from the United States, Cameroon, Somali, Congo, Guinea, Algeria, and Ghana.[4] Awoonor's poem was commissioned by his Chinese hosts to corroborate Mao Zedong's Statement on *Supporting the American Negroes in Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination by U.S. Imperialism*, a declaration released under the request of Robert Williams on August 8, 1963. The poem first captures the pains and sufferings of the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism and then depicts the freedom fight as a long march across the African continent, which received "the freedom shouts of our black brothers" in the United States and joined the chant of "Uhuru, uhuru, uhuru."[5] The metaphor of long march also echoes the March on Washington. In retrospect, Awoonor traces his writing and reading of this poem in Beijing back to the oral literary tradition in Ghana.[6] In addition to "Black Eagle Awakens," Awoonor also wrote a poem to commemorate "Du Bois' death in Ghana" under

the request and read them to massive audiences in Guangdong and Shanghai after his performance in Beijing.[7] To some extent, on the textual level of these poems, Awoonor's journey to China and the context of the poem's appearance are nowhere to be found, even though a trace of Afro-Asian solidarity looms in the background.

Meanwhile, Awoonor's use of poetry to express solidarity in Beijing was not a lone act. It was out of a consensus among Afro-Asian poets. Before coming to Beijing in late August 1963, Kofi Awoonor, as the secretary of the Ghana Society of Writers and editor of the magazine *Okyeame*, "conference hopped" from the Afro-Asian Writers' Executive Meeting in Bali, Indonesia (July 16–20) to the ninth World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs in Hiroshima (August 5–7).[8] The meeting in Bali passed a resolution on poetry that supported the creation, translation, publication, recitation, and exchanges of Afro-Asian poetry.[9] Similarly in the early 1960s' China, the public fever over poetry, especially its recitation, had turned poetry "into a mass-performance art, a state-sanctioned cultural form aimed at engaging and placing on public display the revolutionary passions of China's urban populace."[10] Poetry was deemed as a genre that is closer to people and literary traditions, more expressive and not an imported genre like the novel.

Awoonor's travel in China shows a bilateral interaction within but also beyond the frame of the AAWB, while the travel of his poems also helps us to map the print culture and circulation network within the People's Republic of China (PRC) intersecting with the ones under the support of the Soviet Union or the United States. Two days after Awoonor's performance, the poem *Black Eagles Awakens* appeared in *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party. It was republished in the April 1964 issue of *World Literature* (Shijie Wenxue), a monthly magazine and the official channel of translating and publishing foreign literature in the early 1960s. In June 1964, a poem anthology came out under the same name, *Black Eagle Awakens* (□□□□□□□), by Writers' Publishing House. The anthology includes these two commissioned poems and seven others about Awoonor's sightseeing in different Chinese cities. Poems about love and homeland in the Chinese anthology also appear in his English anthology *Rediscovery and Other Poems.* The latter was published by the CIA-backed Mbari Press in Nigeria in January 1964. The overlaps of Awoonor's Mandarin and English anthologies show the writer's own dynamic crossings through different camps and agency in utilizing different networks of visibility. In 1965, the AAWB anthology of *Afro-Asian poems* published "Black Eagle Awakens" in Colombo. Duncan Yoon analyzes the poem through the frame of symbolic Maoism.[11] If Awoonor's trip to China is taken into consideration, Maoism in his works from the period can be seen to spring from concrete travels and embodied experiences. The hidden context of the poem and the only existence of Awoonor's poems about his China trip in Chinese further exhibit the rift and information gap divided by the Cold War geopolitical delineations.

The appearance of Awoonor's poem both in Beijing and Colombo exhibited the cooperation between the PRC and the AAWB. Awoonor also joined the efforts to promote shared literary aesthetics and nationalist writings beyond national borders, which could be taken as a non-alignment literary movement in the cultural Cold War. Awoonor's travel to China in 1963 was not accidental. Before his trip to Beijing, he had been to the Soviet Union in 1961 and toured Eastern Europe. He also met Han Beiping and Du Xuan, members of Chinese Writers Association, in February 1962 in Accra. Han and Du came to Ghana after their attendance at

the second Afro-Asian Writers' Conference in Cairo. They were invited by Crakye Denteh, the then president of the Ghana Society of Writers. Under the guidance of Felix Morisseau-Leroy, they stayed in Ghana for 11 days. They visited the University of Ghana as well as the Ghana Drama Studio and talked to Efua Sutherland and Prof. Joseph H. K. Nketia. They also watched Joe de Graft's play *Sons and Daughters*. All these were recorded in detail in Han and Du's travelogues.[12] These interactions confirm the active role of Nkrumah's government in supporting writers and institutions as well as Ghanaian writers and intellectuals' initiatives in forming national literature and establishing relationships with other nation-states. They also influenced China's imagination and representations of Africa and the writers' understandings of African literature in that period, giving rise to the imagination of Africa as a revolutionary continent. Back in China, Han Beiping published an introductory piece on Western African oral literature in 1963. He refutes the colonial idea of Africa as a continent devoid of literature by praising its oral literary tradition "as deep as ocean and as shining as the diamond."[13] Han also cites talks with Kofi Awoonor and Keïta Fodéba (1921–1969) to validate his opinions. Afro-Asian cultural interactions were not a one-way travel from China to Africa, even though undeniably, these arranged tours on an elitist level also silenced other voices.

However, these elitist writerly travels in the early 1960s came to a sudden halt. The state facilitated these interactions, but this also determined their relative unsustainability. In 1966, the coup d'etat against Nkrumah's government took place during his visit to Beijing. In the same year, Mao started the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution that paralyzed the whole nation. The previously mentioned Chinese writers suffered to different degrees. As "one of Nkrumah's blue-eyed boys brought in by the party machinery from the universities," Awoonor wanted to travel after the coup to the United States for a PhD program funded by the Farfield Foundation supported by the CIA.[14] He felt relieved that his older passport had expired, so that he did not need to hide his visa to China.[15] He was even accompanied by Dennis Duerden of the Transcription Centre in London to apply for a visa for the United States in 1968.

Years later in an interview, Awoonor admitted, "I was inspired also by my association with some of my good friends in Asia. […] I was going in and out of places like Indonesia, Algeria, China, and India. I discovered the poetry of Mao and Ho Chi Minh."[16] The poet also acknowledged the influences of his contacts with Asian writers and texts in the Cold War era, which helped him see the commonality in themes and narrative patterns and "design and construct theories of our [African] literature from these possibilities."[17] Despite the short life and elitist nature of these travels, literary exchanges and knowledge sharing through Afro-Asian solidarity left traces in one way or another on all involved actors. National politics entangled with the Cold War geopolitics reside not only in grand narratives but also in writers' biographies and the traveling path of literary works. The oral performances of poems add another dimension to the definition of world literature based on circulation and calls for more attention to the poetic genre. The rather inconspicuous "writing with" within the "Third World" also requires more scrutiny of texts beyond literary writings in the Cold War era.

---

[1] Popescu, Monica. 2020. *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War*. Durham: Duke University Press.

[2] See: El Nabolsy, Zeyad. 2021. “Lotus and the Self-Representation of Afro-Asian Writers as the Vanguard of Modernity.” *Interventions* 23 (4): 596–620; Djagalov, Rossen. 2020. *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press; Halim, Hala. 2012. “Lotus, the Afro-Asian Nexus, and Global South Comparatism.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32 (3): 563–583. See: Vanhove, Pieter. 2019. “‘A World to Win’: China, the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau, and the Reinvention of World Literature.” *Critical Asian Studies* 51 (2): 144–165; Brazinsky, Gregg. 2017. *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; Yoon, Duncan M. 2015. “‘Our Forces Have Redoubled’: World Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau.” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2 (2): 233–252.

[3] “Beijing host poetry recitation concert in support of anti-racist struggles“ [□□□□‘□□□□□□□□□□□‘], *Poetry*, 1963, September: 37.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Awoonor, Kofi. “Black Eale Awakens”. *Afro-Asian Poems: Anthology*, Vol. 1, Part 2, 1965, 41-45, 45.

[6] Awoonor, Kofi N. 2006. *The African Predicament: Collected Essays*. Ghana: Sub-Saharan Publishers: 35.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Leow, Rachel. 2019. “A Missing Peace: The Asia-Pacific Peace Conference in Beijing, 1952 and the Emotional Making of Third World Internationalism.” *Journal of World History* 30 (1): 29.

[9] “AAWB executive committee’s Resolution on Poetry” (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□), *Poetry*, 1963, August: 26.

[10] Crespi, John A. 2009. *Voices in Revolution: Poetry and the Auditory Imagination in Modern China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press: 142. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824837532

[11] Yoon, Duncan M. “‘Our Forces Have Redoubled’: World Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau.” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 233–252., doi:10.1017/pli.2015.11.

[12] Du, Xuan. 1964. □□□□ [*West Africa Diary*]. Beijing: Writers Publishing House; Han, Beiping. 1964. □□□□ [*Nights in Africa*]. Tianjin: Baihua Edition.

[13] Han 1963: 101–110.

[14] Awoonor 2006, 16.

[15] Ibid., 26.

[16] Willemse, Hein. 2004. “Kofi Awoonor in conversation with Hein Willemse”. *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde*, 41(2): 192. https://doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v41i2.29685

[17] Ibid.

About the Authors

Mingqing Yuan is a doctoral student at Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (Germany) and a fellow of the project Recalibrating Afrikanistik. She is about to complete her dissertation on literary relationship and mutual representations between Kenya and China.

How to Cite

Yuan, Mingqing. July 6, 2022. "Kofi Awoonor and China: Travels of Afro-Asian Poetry in the Early 1960s." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Lauren Horst | July 6, 2022

Ama Ata Aidoo’s 1977 novel *Our Sister Killjoy* is often remembered as a novel about the harrowing legacy of colonialism and, in the postcolonial moment, the perils of neocolonialism.[1]The novel follows a young woman from Ghana, named Sissie, as she travels to Europe forthe first time. As a protagonist, Sissie is almost singularly focused on the many ways in which colonialism has tightly bound “Africa” to “Europe,” reshaping the continent’s economic system, its governmental structures, its language, and even its culinary tastes around that (and those) of the colonizer. Sissie sees thesecolonial ties everywhere she goes and in every interaction she has. And yet, as this short article suggests, the world of the novel is also one shaped heavily by the Cold War.

That the novel is about bothof these things — the Cold War, on the one hand, and(neo)colonialism, on the other — provides a rare opportunity to think through a set of questions at the heart of Monica Popescu’s recent monograph, *At Penpoint.* In *At Penpoint,* Popescu uses the memorable image of a “developing substance…[l]ike a chemical treatment or heat applied to invisible ink” to describe the effects of reading African literature through the lens of the Cold War.[2] Applying this “chemical treatment” to Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy,* this article looks to reveal some of the literary strategies and techniques thatAidoo uses to write against the so-called “soft power” techniques so commonly employed throughout the Cold War. In particular, this article looks at how the novel uses the idea of seduction — romantic, ideological, and otherwise — to stage the relationship between the world’s two superpowers at this time (the United States and the Soviet Union) and the non-aligned Third World that they each sought to influence and control. This article argues that the novel uses a retrospective narrative structure to disrupt and ultimately to undermine that process of seduction.

Our Sister Killjoy is what could generally be classified as a reversed *Heart of Darkness* narrative, whereby, as Yogita Goyal points out, “rather than Europeans or Americans going to

Africa to find themselves, an African character travels to the heart of the West, only to find darkness there."[3] Each of the four sections of the novel corresponds to a particular phase in Sissie's evolving relationship to Europe. In the novel's first section, titled "Into a Bad Dream," Sissie receives news that she has been selected (we don't know precisely by whom) to participate in an international youth exchange program (we don't know precisely which). In "The Plums" — the novel's longest section and the primary focus of this article — readers travel with Sissie to a small Bavarian town in Germany, where Sissie and her merry band of youth conscripts are working to plant trees at a local pine nursery. There, she quickly befriends a local housewife named Marija. The relationship sours, however, when Marija makes a sexual advance towards Sissie. Sissie forcefully and instinctively rejects Marija's advances, and leaves Bavaria soon after. In the novel's third section, titled "From Our Sister Killjoy," readers travel with Sissie to London, where she is shocked by the poverty of the immigrants she finds living there and disappointed in the African students and young professionals who choose to remain in Europe rather than returning home. In the novel's final section, "A Love Letter," Sissie takes her own advice, leaving the imperial center and flying back home to Ghana.

The novel's investment in thinking through questions of colonialism and neocolonialism is evident in the fact that the novel sends its protagonist *not* to the new centers of power — that is, the Soviet Union and the United States — but to Germany and later to England. Sending Sissie to Europe, and to England in particular, enables the novel to grapple with the unique forms of dependence, exploitation, and affiliation that the metropole exerts on its colonial subjects — and, in this case, its formercolonial subjects. In the novel, these forms of dependence and exploitation revolve almost entirely around higher education, and around graduate and post-graduate study in particular, which the novel casts as the "Most merciless/ Most formalised/ Open,/ Thorough,/ Spy system of all time" (86). There is perhaps an argument to be made that Sissie's,and by extension the novel's, preoccupation with "brain drain" and, to reference Ngũgĩ, the colonizing and decolonizing of the mind is itself a discourse shaped by the logics of the Cold War. To reference Lyndon Johnson's characterization of the Vietnam War as a "battle for hearts and minds," it seems hardly a coincidence that two major themes and plotlines in *Our Sister Killjoy* revolve around hearts and minds — that is to say, around "brain drain" and the news of the world's first heart transplants to emerge out of South Africa in the late 1960s. These references in Aidoo's novel are a testament to the US-USSR rivalry that shaped international affairs at the time; in their efforts to prove themselves technologically superior, both the US and the Soviet Union sought to recruit top global talent — a process decried by the Third World as "brain drain."

To represent this process of recruitment, *Our Sister Killjoy* uses more than references to heart transplants and spy systems; it also uses scenes of food consumption to representthe Third World's unique positionality in the Cold War as the object of US and USSR seductions. Over the course of their stay in Bavaria, Sissie and the other campers are plied with copious, almost grotesque, amounts of food.Lunch for the campers includes nothing less than, "Fresh potatoes, German goulash, cheese, sauerkraut, fish in some form or other, other food items. And always, three different types of bread: white bread, black bread, rye bread. Tons of butter. Pots of jam" (33). Concludes the narrator: "Indeed, portions at each meal were heavy enough to keep a seven foot quarry worker on his feet for a month" (33).As its hyperbolic, over-the-top language suggests, this passage and others like it are about much more than

food; rather, they represent the process by which Sissie and the other campers are to be swayed ideologically — trained, in this case, to fit into the economic system (consumer capitalism) of the so-called western Bloc.

This somewhat cynical take on these scenes of food consumption is shared even by the novel's narrator. In fact, it is the novel's narrator who points out that, "They [the campers] felt no need to worry over who should want them to be there eating. Why should they? Even if the world is rough, it's still fine to get paid to have an orgasm… or isn't it?" (35). Here, the sexual language serves to draw a clear parallel with Marija's attempt to seduce Sissie sexually. It also reframes the international youth exchange program Sissie is participating in as a kind of elaborate seduction—the only difference being that, while Sissie eventually rejects Marija right to her face, Sissie never comes to know who it is that wants her and the other campers to "be there eating." This, naturally, makes resistance somewhat difficult, both for Sissie and for the readers observing the world through her eyes.

At one point in the novel, a curious Marija asks Sissie outright who it is that pays for all her travel. Sissie's response is striking, if somewhat enigmatic: "There was a time," she says, "when it was fashionable to be African. And it paid to be an African student. And if you were an African student with the wanderlust, you travelled" (59). Sissie's response here evokes the enthusiasm for international higher education that swept the world in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This was a time when both the United States and the Soviet Union began to invest considerable resources in youth and student exchange programs. Notable examples include thePeoples' Friendship University in Moscow, founded in 1960 and geared towards students from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. University programming included cultural events, excursions, and holidays intended to cultivate the students' sympathy for the USSR and for Communism more generally. (As Aidoo was almost certainly aware, this sympathy was significantly strained when, in 1963, a Ghanaian student was found dead in Moscow under mysterious circumstances. In an act of protest, nearly 400 African students studying abroad in the USSR marched on Moscow's Red Square.) Not one to be left behind, the United States also launched similar cultural and educational programs around this time including, for instance, "Operation Amigo," a 1960s program bringing Latin American teenagers to American high schools, and the so-called "Kenyan Airlifts" started by Kenyan statesmen Tom Mboya and heavily supported by then-Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy.

Especially striking about the novel's portrayal of this history is the way in which Sissie's response to Marija's question locates the reader at a point in time *after* this frenzy for international education has died down. Note, for instance, how Sissie, supposedly in the middle of a conversation with Marija, responds with the *past* tense: "there *was* a time when it *was* fashionable to be African" (emphasis added). Key to understanding this moment in the text is the novel's retrospective narrator.This narrator, who ought not to be confused with the novel's protagonist Sissie, offers a kind of constant running commentary on Sissie's adventures abroad, commentary framed from the perspective of someone looking back on these experiences as if from a future moment in time. For example, in the food scene discussed earlier, in which the narrator observes that the campers "felt no need to worry over who should want them to be there eating" (35), the passage goes on to say: "Of course, later on when we have become/ Diplomats/ Visiting Professors/ Local experts in sensitive areas/ Or/ Some such hustlers,/ We would have lost even this small awareness, that in the

first place, an invitation was sent" (35). The temporal scheme of this passage is convoluted and its two verbal constructions ("when we have become" and "we would have lost") are fundamentally incompatible. The former, a variant of the future perfect, connotes certainty, while the latter, in the past conditional, connotes uncertainty — or what is sometimes called the "unreal past."The point is that these retrospective interjections from the narrator are part of the novel's overarching project: accounting for, coming to grips with — making visible — the often invisible "soft power" techniques of the Cold War.

This article began with the observation that *Our Sister Killjoy* is a novel about *both* (neo)colonialism *and* the Cold War. However, the twofold perspective that the novel offers (that of Sissie and the narrator) suggests something of a modification to that statement: *Sissie* may see colonialism everywhere around her, but what the novel sees—and what it encourages its readers to see—are also the "soft power" techniques of the Cold War. By "soft power," I mean those subtler forms of power — diplomatic, cultural, and economic — that are less immediately visible when compared to events such as the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban missile crisis, and the protracted war in Vietnam. In contrast, the "soft" power techniques that Sissie resists and that *Our Sister Killjoy* critiques really only look like power in retrospect. Of course, the problem, as *Our Sister Killjoy* suggests, is that by the time Sissie (or any other similarly "seduced" subject) is looking back, she risks having already become such an integral part of that ideological system that it is difficult to entertain any meaningful critique of it anymore.*Our Sister Killjoy* attempts to correct for that problem. By locating its narrator at a point *beyond* the process of indoctrination that Sissie is undergoing, and by enabling that narrator to continually interrupt that process, *Our Sister Killjoy* is able to offer a critique of the Cold War without also reproducing its ideological frameworks.

---

[1] Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Our Sister Killjoy, or, Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint*. London: Longman, 1994. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[2] Popescu, Monica. *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War*. A Theory in Forms Book. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020: 27.

[3] Goyal, Yogita. "Africa and the Black Atlantic." *Research in African Literatures* 45, no. 3 (2014): xii. https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.45.3.v.

About the Authors

Lauren Horst is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. She is completing her dissertation titled "Fictions of Development: Decolonization, Development Economics, and the African Novel." She holds a B.A. from New York University Abu Dhabi.

How to Cite

Horst, Lauren. July 6, 2022. "Cold War Seductions in Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Carolyn Ownbey | July 6, 2022

Analyzing African literature through a Cold War lens nuances both objects of study, adding layers of complexity to an already overwrought sociopolitical landscape in Africa, and complicating the presumed clear-cut ideological (and often geographical) Cold War binary. Modeling such a theoretical approach, Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint* provides a framework for understanding the legacies of the Cold War in postcolonial studies — including its watermark on current methodologies and modalities of thinking.[1] Postcolonial studies, Popescu contends, has been reduced to "a field concerned with forms of Western domination as they evolved in tandem with the capitalist system" (13). Counter to this, Popescu advocates for "a redefinition of postcolonial studies," which "should instead address diachronically overlapping and synchronically interweaving forms of (neo)colonial domination" (13). Reading from both sides of the Cold War binary and acknowledging the structural overlaps of oppressive regimes helps us to understand both contexts more fully. In this essay I hope to gesture towards what we can learn from this kind of reading in our own time. This essay focuses on two writers, one from each side of the divide: an anti-Communist Czech dissident, playwright/philosopher/politician Václav Havel, and South African communist, activist/poet/cultural worker Mongane Wally Serote.

I activate Popescu's approach through a comparative reading. As Popescu notes, "with its uncomfortable position in relation to Western capitalism and Soviet communism, South Africa becomes a privileged site for exploring Cold War contradictions" (156). I contend that Czechoslovakia, especially following the 1968 Soviet invasion, provides a similarly ripe context for the exploration of imperialism, censorship, and resistance during the Cold War. What are the alignments and confluences that we can discover in these two writers despite their opposing positions? What overlaps can be drawn from concurrent imperialisms, and what anti-imperial strategies might suit both contexts? Reading modes of literature developed for local conditions in a radically global context, I use Popescu's framework to parse commonality between ideological poles. In short, I ask: what can reading these two writers and their contexts *together* teach us?

Havel and Serote were diametrically opposed in many ways, obviously in relation to Communism — Serote was a committed Communist party member even beyond the end of the Cold War; Havel falls squarely on the anti-Communist side of things — but perhaps most relevant here is their conflicting orientations toward the uses of literature for political ends, or at least how they *articulated* their views on the subject. Havel witnessed the dangers of art coopted by the state for political purposes, and so, like his compatriot Milan Kundera, developed a theory of anti-political writing. Conversely, Serote wanted to weaponize culture for political ends — specifically to wield against the ostensibly capitalist apartheid government. What my essay I hope will demonstrate is that these two figures, specifically as cultural workers resisting repressive colonial regimes, have a lot more in common than this description might suggest.

Havel's Anti-Soviet Alignment

Havel's Cold War era writing career can be conceived in roughly three periods: writing primarily for the stage leading up to the Prague Spring in 1968; formulating an anti-totalitarian philosophy and literary approach in the years following the Soviet invasion and

leading to his imprisonment in 1979; and writing as and after having been a political prisoner in the late-1970s and 1980s. Havel became perhaps most famous during the second of these, for his involvement in “Charter 77,” a title which refers both to an internationally circulated human rights document, as well as to the collective of its signatories.[2] Havel was a primary author of the document and one of the movement’s original spokesmen. In Tom Stoppard’s words, Havel and his fellow Chartists were “calling upon the Czech government to abide by its own laws”; in Kundera’s more provocative rendering, “since the constitution guarantees the freedom of speech, [the Chartists] naively draw all the consequences. They conduct themselves as if words really mean what they are supposed to mean.”[3] Havel’s short imprisonment in 1977, which prefigured a longer stint in jail beginning in 1979, did not dissuade him, at least not for long. In 1978, Havel penned “The Power of the Powerless,” an essay which circulated among his peers and finally appeared as the centerpiece of a larger collection of anti-totalitarian essays. “Charter 77” and “The Power of the Powerless” together represent the milestones of Havel’s post-1968, pre-incarceration approach to the Czech problem.

Charter 77 was a citizens’ initiative that aimed to call the Czech government to account. While freedom of speech, freedom from fear, and other fundamental human rights were on the books in Czechoslovakia, they were not guaranteed in practice. Citing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights — both signed and reaffirmed by the Czech government in 1968 and 1975 — the Charter’s signatories issued “an urgent reminder of the many fundamental human rights that, regrettably, exist in our country only on paper.”[4] Calling for transparency and adherence to legality, “Charter 77” takes aim at what Havel calls the post-totalitarian system.[5] The Czech government’s public rebuke of the Chartists for dereliction of duty to the Socialist state is plainly a call for conformity. Conversely, Charter 77 explicitly represents plurality and diversity: “Charter 77 is a free and informal and open association of people of various convictions, religions and professions.”[6] Totalitarian and post-totalitarian systems require isolated, obedient, non-critical or non-thinking citizens. Charter 77, on the other hand, represents a different kind of citizenship — one that, Havel thought, had the potential to take on and even take down a totalitarian regime. The Chartists advocate for a citizenry that is engaged, critical, and perhaps most of all, responsible: “every individual bears a share of responsibility for the general conditions in the country, and therefore also for compliance with the enacted pacts.”[7] Reframing the concepts of compliance and citizenship while claiming the authority to enforce the human rights covenants to which Czechoslovakia was party, Charter 77 issues a direct challenge to the post-1968 regime.

In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel expands the Charter’s reformulation of responsible citizenship in the face of post-totalitarianism. “Between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss,” he argues: “while life, in its essence, moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organization, in short, towards the fulfilment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline.”[8] His insistence upon plurality is the hallmark of anti-totalitarianism, and for Havel cultural forms—everything from theatre to philosophical writing — are the most effective way to achieve such plurality. When, during the first days of Soviet occupation in 1968, Havel issued international radio broadcasts, “he did not call for the intervention of NATO or the American troops deployed a few kilometres to the west, but

summoned his colleagues and friends, writers and critics… to protest the abomination. It was a strange phalanx to mobilize in the face of an armoured military operation, but Havel had his reasons, citing the role played by writers and intellectuals during the Prague Spring."[9] Havel believes in the power of culture to bring systemic change. Soviet suppression of dissenting writers bolstered Havel's belief, rather than stifled it. Havel's plays and political writings in the decades leading up to the Velvet Revolution upheld his commitment to anti-totalitarian politics and his faith in the power of cultural forms in pursuing them.

Serote's Anti-Apartheid Activism

South Africa's participation in international politics was fraught from the early postwar years. The National Party government, or the apartheid regime, came into power in 1948. The same year, South Africa's delegates to the United Nations abstained from the vote on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the following decades, South Africa lost its seat at the UN, was excluded from the Olympic Games, withdrew from the Commonwealth, and became subject to international scrutiny and human rights inquiries. Following the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, Amnesty International sent observers to political trials in South Africa. Much of this history invites comparison with the Soviet regime during the same period, but South Africa publicly aligned itself with the West by endorsing capitalism over communism. The Suppression of Communism Act came into effect in South Africa in 1950, with the ostensible purpose of banning the South African Communist Party and other communist-affiliated organizations. In practice, the Act served as a convenient pretext for the suppression of anti-apartheid resistance.

At the same time as it was losing its official place at the UN, the South African government was vying for a permanent seat at the International Atomic Energy Agency. Performing anti-communism publicly was part and parcel of the government's strategy: Western capitalist countries would be more likely to invest in South African manufacturing and to turn a blind eye to human rights violations if South Africa appeared on their side of the Cold War. Additionally, violent, government-sanctioned anti-communism was in many ways a ruse to enforce apartheid.[10]

As a cultural worker and activist, Serote has a dual commitment to literary innovation and revolutionary politics. Writing as a Black South African man who lived much of his life in exile, Serote's writings reflect his radical political subjectivity. Among his literary works, Serote is perhaps best known for his poetry. For the purposes of this essay, I want to touch just briefly on this to give a sense of the tenor of much of his apartheid-era poetry, before transitioning to a brief discussion of one of his post-apartheid novels, *Gods of our Time*, where I see one of the clearest articulations of his anti-apartheid politics manifest.

In the poetry collection *Behold Mama, Flowers*, published in 1978, Serote's poetic anti-apartheid activism hits hard. Early in the title poem, Serote's speaker asks:

> how can i forgive
>
> when phaladi trembled in the street
> his heart pouring blood out like an angry fountain
> and his scream tore the night, fighting with death

death, which soon settled in his eyes turning them into marble
who heard

when the mother turned away from the court
holding her boy by the hand
her heart missing beats in disbelief
that her man was gone to prison for life [11]

Later in the poem, Serote describes an imprisoned old man, driven mad by isolation. Serote's speaker is angry, traumatized. He demands answers from the mad old man: "tell me old man, tell me / through your absent eyes and mind / can i forgive / i walk / i hide in shadows which keep fading / listen / but how can i forgive / but how can i forgive."[12] Serote does not shy away from criticism of the state and its gross abuses of humanity and human rights. He does this, of course, in alignment with the Communist cause, despite whatever human rights violations may be occurring on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Fast-forward to the post-apartheid era, with the benefit of hindsight: Serote's anti-apartheid sentiments have not changed, and in the novel *Gods of Our Time* he provides a crystal-clear articulation of what the anti-apartheid movement necessitated to defeat the repressive regime.[13] The novel proceeds by associative logic: circuitous and contingent, the stories of characters build a coherent narrative only in concert, occasionally literally. Individual voices rise to the surface momentarily, and are subsumed again in the crowd. During one of many funeral scenes in the novel, Lindi, a singer and old friend of the narrator, emerges as "a single voice whose strength held this large, strong, angered crowd" (171). Her voice cannot sustain the movement alone. The thousands gathered for the funeral follow and fortify her song: "There was movement. More song. Lindi took the song. Her voice sailed above the voices of the thousands of people. She led the song, increased the pace of the rhythym [sic]. The people began to dance the toyi-toyi" (174). Emblematic of the anti-apartheid struggle, the toyi-toyi only works in a crowd. It is necessarily massive, and therein lies its revolutionary force. While Lindi leads the crowd in song, the narrator broadens his focus:

> A young voice intercepted the song; the crowd replied. Another song. I realised then that there were fathers and mothers in the crowd. I realised that I had not understood what it was when I kept saying the community, the community—everyone was here. They came from Natal, OFS [the Orange Free State], and the Cape—many, many shades of blacks. Young men, young women, singing in line, in rhythym [sic] with the chant, with the slogan. And these kept them close with old men and women. Workers, I thought, are here. They must be here because they are the community! For a while I felt safe. Just for a while. (174)

The movement is necessarily diverse, intersectional, and collective. It draws from different age groups, genders, geographical points, and occupations. Collectivity is a necessary device to *Gods of Our Time*, for narrative reasons as well as for political ones. In the novel, Serote endeavors to represent the interconnections among a litany of socio-political actors and issues. Racial equality, women's rights, gay rights, AIDS in South Africa, and poverty, among others, feature as central to the main characters and plotlines. When asked in a 2014 interview what he hoped for the future of South African literature, Serote replied, "I wish that it can bloom, it can create more new writers who are honest, who are uncompromisingly

patriotic, who will always continuously evaluate what the struggle for liberation has gained, and how it should be taken forward."[14] Crucially, literature's revolutionary potential is not spent when the apartheid regime ends.

Conclusions

What can we learn from these two authors, whose political alignments were in direct conflict? Havel tries to separate himself from a circumscribed Soviet politics; in his writings he thinks through civic responsibility in the face of totalitarianism. Serote, on the other hand, views the political as deeply necessary to cultural work; his works articulate a version of democracy based on increasingly broader inclusion. In both cases, the conceptions of citizenship or community that emerge rely on a broad notion of what we might call democracy — not in the sense of government, but of human communities and human rights — despite contradictory "political" orientations. In her rejection of "the still deep-going assumption that democracy is necessarily a national form," Bonnie Honig insists that, "democracy is not just a set of governing institutions." Instead, it is "a commitment to local and popular empowerment, effective representation, accountability, and the generation of actions in concert across lines of difference."[15] Democracy is inclusionary, rather than exclusionary. It necessitates diversity, plurality, and community. Both Havel and Serote imagine communities that are substantively democratic — whether Communist or otherwise — and they give the lie to their respective governmental regimes and social systems that claim to be egalitarian.

By way of conclusion I want to suggest that we have much to learn from these two contexts—that reading them together, understanding their nuances, distinctions, and overlaps might help us in *this* historical moment, especially for those of us in the US, to see and to understand our own social systems and political structures more fully. I doubt it is a coincidence that both Havel and Serote spent time in the US during the civil rights era and immediately following. Serote incorporates what he learned from Black activists into his writing—from references to civil rights leaders and Black American activist musicians in his works, to the searing lines from "Behold Mama, Flowers," where his speakers asks, "how can i forget, even if i want to forget / that in the fathoms of the sea are bones / screaming bones still chained and bloodstained."[16] Havel, meanwhile, "delayed [his] departure [from the US] and joined other writers and theater people to participate in [a Central Park civil rights] march, which protested segregation and honored [Martin Luther] King's memory"; he was deeply affected by the US civil rights movement, and considered it a model he could apply to the post-totalitarian system.[17] In our current moment, totalitarian moves and capitalistic structures determine the landscape. While I don't have space to explore fully what Serote and Havel together can teach us, at very least reading these authors together shows us that imaginative literature, despite ostensible political alignment, has something to do with democratic commitment.

---

[1] Popescu, Monica. *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2020. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[2] Charter 77. Reprinted as "Manifesto Charging Rights Violations in Czechoslovakia." *The New York Times*, 27 January 1977.

http://www.nytimes.com/1977/01/27/archives/manifesto-charging-rights-violations-in-czechoslovakia.html?_r=0

[3] Stoppard, Tom. “Introduction (to *The Memorandum*).” 1980. *Václav Havel: Living in Truth*. Ed. Vladislav, Jan. London: Faber, 1987: 279. Kundera, Milan. “Candide Had to be Destroyed.” 1979. *Václav Havel: Living in Truth*. Ed. Vladislav, Jan. London: Faber, 1987: 261.

[4] “Charter 77.”

[5] Post-totalitarianism for Havel is essentially a less physically violent form of totalitarianism, but it retains its deeply repressive aspects in less physical ways.

[6] “Charter 77.”

[7] Ibid.

[8] Havel, Václav. “The Power of the Powerless.” 1978. *International Journal of Politics* 15.3/4: *The Power of the Powerless* (Fall-Winter 1985-86): 29-30.

[9] Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life.* New York: Grove Press, 2014: 116.

[10] Serote himself was detained, imprisoned, and tortured under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act in 1969.

[11] Serote, Mongane Wally. *Behold Mama, Flowers*. Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1978.

[12] Ibid, 18.

[13] Serote, Mongane Wally. *Gods of Our Time.* Cape Town: Ravan Press, 1999. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[14] Serote “On the Role of Literature in the Struggle for Liberation.” *SABC Digital News*. South African Broadcasting Corporation. 3 May 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTjvSEPHdlY

[15] Honig, Bonnie. *Democracy and the Foreigner*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001: 13.

[16] Serote 1978, 12.

[17] Rocamora, Carol. *Acts of Courage: Václav Havel’s Life in the Theater*. Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus, 2005: 93.

About the Authors

Carolyn Ownbey is Assistant Professor and Chair of English, Communications, and Literature at Golden Gate University in San Francisco. Her scholarly work focuses on anticolonial literature and performance, new media and protest, and theories of democracy and citizenship. Dr. Ownbey has essays published in *Law & Literature*, *Textual Practice*,

Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, and *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, among others.

How to Cite

Ownbey, Carolyn. July 6, 2022. "Against Empire: Reading Anticoloniality across Cold War Divides." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Mathias Iroro Orhero | July 6, 2022

Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* invites us to rethink the place of African literature in the context of the Cold War. Based on the premise that the superpowers — the West and Eastern bloc — held African cultural productions at "penpoint" through competing imperialisms and aesthetic systems, Popescu explores the intricacies, aesthetic alliances, and non-alignment that are reflected in the artistic commitments of African writers.[1] Drawing from Popescu's understanding of artistic commitment, I explore the concept of minority resistance in Nigeria's Niger Delta poetry in the context of the Cold War and its effect on a Global South nation like Nigeria. My premise is that the collusion of oil multinationals that are primarily headquartered in the West with their Nigerian state collaborators in the expropriation, exploitation, and marginalization of the people of the oil-rich Niger Delta necessitated an artistic response that can be understood in terms of what Popescu describes as "affective temporal structures."[2] I read the affective temporal structures that drive artistic commitment and minority resistance in some poems by Niger Delta writers.

In part one of her book, Popescu tracks the literary and cultural institutions, associations, and conferences that influenced early African writing and identifies the ideological binary of the modernist aesthetic and realism in Africa. She submits that "In engaging with or distancing themselves from aesthetic categories backed by the West or the Eastern Bloc, writers became participants in the processes of cultural production shaped by the Cold War."[3] In other words, the global impact of the Cold War plays out even in instances when African writers distanced themselves from the highly politicized aesthetic categories.

Described in the context of Wallerstein's world-systems approach, Popescu engages the "mythologies of modernism and realism" in African literatures. She argues that the superpowers used these categories to propagate their ideological and cultural warfare in Africa. Despite her refusal to describe any work as modernist or realist, she acknowledges how these aesthetic choices have been claimed and politicized and how African writers position themselves in this context by their acceptance, disavowal, or alteration of these categories. Citing the examples of little magazines and the writing of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Popescu discusses the different positionalities of African writers and how they subvert the aesthetic categories which try to claim African writing. Through her example of Ngũgĩ, she concedes that African writers have indigenized received aesthetic forms and achieved freedom from the "hold of the aesthetic world-systems," despite the abiding presence of artistic commitment.[4]

Furthering Popescu's understanding of artistic commitment in the context of "decolonization

of writing modes" in which she foregrounds Ngũgĩ's transition from a modernist through the socialist realist mode to a hybrid realist mode that draws from indigenous aesthetic forms, writers from Nigeria's Niger Delta also inscribe minority resistance through a hybrid realist mode that draws from indigenous aesthetic forms. In showing their artistic commitments to the issues affecting the region, Niger Delta writers frequently draw from the trope of revolution/resistance. The negative consciousness of the writers puts them against the politics of modernism and its association with multinational oil capitalists and the so-called economic core nations that have destroyed their region through reckless and unsustainable oil exploration and extraction. It also puts them against the Nigerian state whose derivative and asymmetrical nationalism and neocolonial tendencies necessitate a form of realism rooted in the trope of revolution and resistance and indigenous aesthetic forms that encode a sense of minority cultural nationalism.

Although Popescu's book historicizes the influence of modernism and realism in the context of the Cold War, my claim for a hybrid realist aesthetic in Niger Delta writing comes from two historical positions. The first is the immediate context of the Cold War, and the second is the continued relevance of the hybrid realist mode that evolved, based on Popescu's thesis, from the decolonization of aesthetic categories. It is noteworthy that Popescu's comment about Ngũgĩ's search for a different aesthetic form in the mid to late 1970s coincides with the rise of a type of poetry that Femi Osofisan and Funso Aiyejina describe as "alternative tradition."[5] Focusing on Nigerian writing, Osofisan contrasts those in the older generation whose works would be in the category that Popescu labels "African modernism" with younger writers: "The older writers represented a watershed (in both the socio historical and the purely aesthetic aspects of artistic expression) and it was a watershed from which we had to depart in order to keep our rendezvous with history."[6] In describing why the alternative writers felt the need for more artistic commitment, Osofisan cites the "decay that has followed the discovery of oil" and how the pessimism with Nigeria's peripheral capitalism, and by extension, the modernist aesthetic that had hitherto dominated writing culminated in a new aesthetic mode.[7] These new writers, Osofisan submits, "deserted the grandiose ambitions of the last decade, not as an accident, but as a conscious and infidel act of self-purgation. They openly dissociate themselves (even while paying due homage) from the posture and pronouncements of their predecessors and seek to create an art that would be accessible to the large majority of the Nigerian public, rather than to a cultured and privileged few."[8] In addition to their realist mode, they also rely on indigenous forms, or indigenous poetics, as Aiyejina calls it.[9] This recourse to indigenous modes, as opposed to the predominantly "anglo-modernist sensibility" of the earlier generation of Nigerian writers as well as the radical perspectives and "rigorous self-criticism to which these poets often subject themselves and their country" inspired the hybrid realist aesthetic that informs the poetry of Tanure Ojaide, a significant voice in the alternative tradition and arguably the most important and prolific poet from the Niger Delta.[10]

Following Popescu's thesis on the evolution of Ngũgĩ's writing, it is interesting that Niger Delta writing also follows the same trajectory, with early writers like John Pepper Clark and Gabriel Okara associated with the modernist tradition, and Tanure Ojaide, together with later poets, writing in a hybrid realist mode. The cultural politics of the Cold War also found full resolution in Niger Delta poetry and its decolonized aesthetic forms, artistic commitments, and its resistance trope. Ojaide's collection, *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), begins with a

quotation from Ngũgĩ's *Petals of Blood*: "There is no night so long that it will not give way to the light of day."[11] This intertextuality reveals Ojaide's commitment to Ngũgĩ's revolutionary and decolonial temper that Popescu foregrounds in her book, and it also confirms Ojaide's politics in the context of the cultural battles of the Cold War. The trope of resistance is couched in Ojaide's hybrid realist mode. Popescu's comment that revolutions can be understood in the context of "affective temporal structures" as "ways of perceiving the present moment and establishing relations (whether of continuity or rupture) between the present, on the one hand, and the past and the future, on the other" is quite useful in thinking of minority resistance in Niger Delta poetry as a social process in which individuals and communities that comprise the geopolitical and bio-regional enclave rally against socio-political domination (in the context of derivative nationalism) even as they affect and are affected by larger discourses.[12]

The resistance imaginary in Niger Delta poetry has been read as symptomatic of Marxist leanings, oil politics, and environmental degradation.[13] I read it here in the context of the Cold War and minority politics. Ojaide's titular poem in *Labyrinths of the Delta* is a relatively long poem with five distinct parts. The lines are unrhymed, and the stanzas are of unequal length. The first part of the poem introduces the reader to a people figured as "we," confirming Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd's position on the collective nature of minority discourse.[14] These people are chased by an oppressor known as "Ogiso," a tyrannical character from the mythic memory of Ojaide's Urhobo people, to a new land. In the second and third parts of the poem, the people make a home in their new Deltaic region, and the speaker romanticizes the environment and culture. By the fourth part of the poem, this new home is invaded by "Conquistadors" who "drove gunboats from the Atlantic."[15] In the fifth part, a new nation-state has been created, and the speaker invokes resistance against the derivative and asymmetrical nationalism of the new state using the hybrid aesthetic mode:

> In the thronged assembly, gods and men:
> Uhagwa in a feather-hat singing of the love we owe the land;
> Abadi, axe in hand; Egba with his leonine dog;
> And in our midst numerous deities, some unheard of
> But bearing our names. They have come back, the dead,
> Moved by our thumping feet, voices, and drums:
> For his dedication, Kwokori will be our main street;
> May Essi's matchet no longer be raised against neighbours,
> But against robbers of the new-found home;
> Mowarin, my namesake, telling us great things are coming;
> Okitiakpe, singing and dancing as no man has ever done;
> And thousands – the couriers whose blood was libation abroad –
> They have come to the concourse, happy spirits.
> Uvo! Ogidigbo! Your names will endure like the sky.
> After you were driven through half the world, you stood
> Your ground and beat back your foes – *ama hirhe erherie*.
> Not once did you go to battle without returning with spoils.
> O you warriors, give us the resolve to fight for years on years
> In the security of your shield of leaves.[16]

I have reproduced the poem at length in order to underscore the depth at which the resistance imaginary collaborates with the hybrid realist aesthetic of the poem. The poem speaker's negative consciousness, to draw from JanMohamed and Lloyd, comes from how power operates in the newly achieved "statehood" of Nigeria. [17] Figured as a group that has suffered oppression and domination over the years, the speaker invokes folk heroes and gods to rally the people against "robbers of the new-found home." The image of robbers represents those who plunder the region's natural resources and minoritize the people — the multinational oil companies and the nation-state that other dominant groups control. In a poetic style similar to *Udje* and other song-poetry traditions of the Urhobo people, Ojaide inscribes resistance by calling on the spirits of warriors to "give us resolve to fight for years on years." This resistance imaginary agrees with the poem's adoption of a hybrid aesthetic mode.

In terms of affective temporal structures, the poem speaker's resistance temper reflects the revolutionary tone that one finds in the works of writers like Ngũgĩ. With a focus on the agency of the people in taking their destiny into their hands, and in a populist language laced with folklore, Ojaide shows awareness of Cold War politics. In the face of Euro-American exploitation, the failure of Nigerian leaders to create a working and equitable national framework, and the neocolonialism of the Niger Delta, Ojaide connects the present moment with colonial domination and heritage, the failure of previous revolutions (through military coups), and the realities of the global scene at the time in his advocacy for minority agency through the function of resistance.

Later Niger Delta poets like Nnimmo Bassey, Ogaga Ifowodo, and Peter Omoko take up the resistance imaginary and hybrid realist aesthetic to further the cause of minority resistance against multinational oil capitalism and socio-political domination and marginalization, thus confirming the continued relevance of the Cold War-inflected aesthetic commitment in the contemporary moment. The cover image of Nnimmo Bassey's *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* (2011) features a clenched fist in a red background. This image generally represents revolution and resistance. By using this cover image, Bassey visually inscribes the resistance imaginary and continues in the tradition that Ojaide had established in the 80s. Bassey also uses hybrid realist poetics in the titular poem in his *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* to inscribe resistance: "They may kill all / But the blood will speak / They may gain all / But the soil will RISE / We may die / and yet stay alive."[18] Bassey's resistance temper here is in the context of environmental destruction and neglect of the Niger Delta region by oil multinationals and the Nigerian state that has pushed the region's people to a position of alterity.

Similarly, Omoko's "They Call Me Restive" articulates resistance through the negative consciousness of the speaker and the resulting binary of "we vs them" that reflects the operation of power in the Nigerian nation. Through "I" and "You," Omoko's speaker speaks to dominant structures and oppressors that have created the alterity and marginality of the Niger Delta people. The "you" is described as a "thief" who accuses the marginalized "I" of being restive "for asking to be equal."[19] The poem encodes resistance in the lines: "I shall come to you with clubs, cudgels, / And machetes to slice away that you've / Taken from me that we may be equal."[20] Here, too, the poem uses the hybrid realist aesthetic to portray minority resistance.

The affective temporal structures that inform the later Niger Delta poems are evident in the pessimism and anger of the poets' tone. Pained by the complicity of the West in their plights as well as the failure of the national collective in being sensitive to the region, the poets engage in a larger discourse that draws from the trope of revolution. However, as Popescu argues, they "wrest" the term from any Eurocentric grounding, and they reconfigure it in the form of minority resistance. [21] These poets invite their readers to rethink the nature of nation and nationalism, power, and oil capitalism in the context of minority groups and their experiences. This is particularly salient in Ogaga Ifowodo's "Ogoni," where the speaker is a military officer who is described as the "chief pacifier / of the lower Niger's / still primitive tribes" whose resistance had "shut down Shell's oil wells / and slimmed the nation's purse."[22] The Niger Delta poets continue to show artistic commitment in the way Popescu thinks of it through Ngũgĩ. Using a hybrid aesthetic mode that refutes Euro-American cultural provincialization, they articulate a decolonized understanding of resistance that is sensitive to their minoritized position in the national collective.

My argument so far is that Popescu's work provides a way to theorize minority resistance in Niger Delta poetry. In her claim for the agency of African writers in the context of the Cold War, Popescu provides the foundation to think of Niger Delta poetry using a Cold War lens. Through the idea of affective temporal structures and hybrid realist aesthetic, I read some poems based on the groundwork laid by Popescu. In doing this, I contribute a missing piece to Popescu's seminal monograph: the works of Niger Delta writers. I believe minority writers deserve special consideration because of how they are positioned in and against the nation. This position allows us to read the influence of the Cold War in Africa beyond the category of "national" or "continental." It also provides ways of seeing how the Cold War influenced specific cultures and traditions. This is what I have tried to demonstrate in this short essay.

---

[1] Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77317.

[2] Ibid., 111.

[3] Ibid., 32.

[4] Ibid., 103.

[5] Femi Osofisan, "The Alternative Tradition : A Survey Of Nigerian Literature In English Since The Civil War," *Présence Africaine*, no. 139 (1986): 162–84; Funso Aiyejina, "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: A Critical Survey," *Kunapipi* 9, no. 2 (1987): 24–36.

[6] Popescu, *At Penpoint,* 78; Osofisan, "The Alternative Tradition," 163.

[7] Ibid., 164.

[8] Ibid., 164.

[9] Aiyejina, "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: A Critical Survey," 33.

[10] Ibid., 25, 31.

[11] Tanure Ojaide, *Labyrinths of the Delta* (Greenfield Review Press, 1986).

[12] Popescu, *At Penpoint,* 111; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (U of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[13] See: Jide Balogun, "The Poet as a Social Crusader: Tanure Ojaide and the Poetry of Intervention," *Journal of Humanities* 20, no. 1 (2006): 78–88, https://doi.org/10.4314/jh.v20i1; Philip Aghoghovwia, "The Poetics and Politics of Transnational Petro-Environmentalism in Nnimmo Bassey's 'We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood,'" *English in Africa* 41, no. 2 (2014): 59–77; Sule Emmanuel Egya, "Nature and Environmentalism of the Poor: Eco-Poetry from the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2015.1083848.

[14] Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, "Introduction: Minority Discourse: What Is to Be Done?," *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (1987): 5–17, https://doi.org/10.2307/1354148.

[15] Ojaide, *Labyrinths of the Delta,* 25.

[16] Ibid., 26–27.

[17] JanMohamed and Lloyd, "Introduction."

[18] Nnimmo Bassey, *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* (Kraft Books, 2002), 15.

[19] Peter Omoko, *Herding South* (African Books Collective, 2019), 19.

[20] Ibid., 19.

[21] Popescu, *At Penpoint,* 144.

[22] Ogaga Ifowodo, *The Oil Lamp* (Africa World Press, 2005), 37.

About the Authors

Mathias Iroro Orhero is a Ph.D. candidate and Teaching Assistant at the Department of English, McGill University, Montréal, Canada. He is primarily interested in minority discourse in Nigerian and Canadian literatures, particularly in Niger Delta and Black Canadian poetry. He has articles in journals like *Journal of Comparative Literature and Culture* and *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, and in the book series, *African Literature Today*.

How to Cite

Orhero, Mathias Iroro. July 6, 2022. "Artistic Commitment and Minority Resistance: Monica Popescu's At Penpoint and Niger Delta Poetry." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.

By Elizabeth M. Holt | July 6, 2022

Surprisingly little critical work has been done on the intersection of oil and Arabic literature, despite the centrality of the carbon economy to the region's history. Amitav Ghosh coined the phrase "petrofiction" in a review of Saudi writer Abd al-Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* in 1992, principally to mark the dearth of novels about oil despite its ubiquity in our lives. Oil is an elusive object of narration, at once everywhere, and yet a thematic focus of relatively few works of literature. Ghosh points readers to Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* as one of the only other examples of a petronovel in world literature. Criticism of petroleum's place in the Arabic novel continues to pivot around Munif and Kanafani, with Ellen McLarney's "Empire of the Machine" serving as an exemplar of this critical trend, while more recently Hanan Hammad has taken up the Arabic oil novel in relation to the question of mobility in postcolonial Egypt and its entanglements with the petro-economy. If the study of petrofiction has in many regards barely begun for Arabic, scholars such as Jennifer Wenzel in the African context and those involved in the Petrocultures group offer a framework for a broader analysis of the border-crossing genres of petroculture. In much of this critical work, the novel poses as a passive reflection of what petroleum has wrought, or collides with the omnipresence of products and moments in everyday life derived of petroleum, such that perhaps every contemporary novel becomes a petronovel.

> ***Reading petroleum as it is reflected in the pages of novels, or for what objects and plots oil has decreed for petrofiction, therefore threatens to limit our ability to perceive the oil complex and with it, the ways that oil makes novels and poetry.***

In her recent book *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk*, Arbella Bet-Shlimon offers a way to read oil and the Arabic press otherwise, drawing comparatively on figurings of petroleum in the African context. Bet-Shlimon insists we read oil through the "oil complex," articulating a sensorium of petroleum "as a composite of institutions and as a means of political, social, and economic production."[1] This methodological pivot allows Bet-Shlimon to point readers to the importance of the British Petroleum- and Royal Dutch Shell-owned Iraq Petroleum Company's in-house publications such as *Iraq Petroleum* and *Ahl al-Naft*, as well as the library branch opened in Kirkuk by the United States Information Services, and the flourishing of literary production in the 1950s and 1960s alongside the IPC's intensive oil extraction. A key editor of these IPC publications was the Palestinian poet, painter, novelist, and translator Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, while the Arabic-English translator Denys Johnson-Davies was involved in similar projects for American oil companies in the Gulf. The IPC publications operated within a landscape of public-private partnerships, whereby the US and British governments worked with private companies and local governments to drill for oil and erect a region-wide system of pipelines. Come the 1960s, China would in turn fund radical Gulf politics in an attempt to gain access to the region's oil markets, to be delivered by tanker across the waters of the Indian Ocean. A publication like *Ahl al-Naft* emerges, then, as both produced by petroleum, but also in turn productive of the materiality of oil, its future flows, and the institutions that maintain this global energy order. Reading petroleum as it is reflected in the pages of novels, or for what objects and plots oil has decreed for petrofiction, therefore threatens to limit our ability to perceive the oil complex and with it, the ways that oil makes novels and poetry.

In 1954, the globally distributed anti-Communist London magazine *Encounter* ran one of many advertisements for Shell oil, this one entitled "Oil Is Our Way of Life." An unusually direct depiction of the extractive imperial logic of Cold War petroleum, Shell enumerates the many daily apparitions of oil ("the linoleum on her kitchen floor," "the nail-varnish on her dressing table," "the basic amenities of your life on earth," "it speeds the plough"). Published by "The Shell Petroleum Co. Ltd., St. Helen's Court, London," the ad ends: "Petroleum in its crude form, dredged from the desert, marsh, and jungle, is an unfriendly substance, dark, often sticky, sometimes smelly. But the products of its refinement oil the wheels of life: cleanly, smoothly and increasingly." Oil here is depicted through the extractive logic of empire, whereby raw materials are drawn out from the earth's deserts, marshes, and jungles to be refined in the imperial center, rather like the Euro-American-centered map of world literature animating Pascale Casanova's seminal and widely cited *World Republic of Letters*. And oil here is underwriting those imperial centers, not just ideologically in the copy of this full-page ad, but in the material support Shell oil is lending *Encounter* magazine, published by the Paris-headquartered Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), a Cold War project covertly founded and funded by the United States Central Intelligence Agency in 1950.

Following the Bandung conference in 1955 and its calls for Afro-Asian solidarity amid trenchant critiques of imperialism and colonialism, the CCF extended its operations far beyond Europe, turning to Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Denys Johnson-Davies, and Albert Hourani (among others) as they planned their Arabic operations. Johnson-Davies published *Aswat*, an Arabic journal out of London, in the early 1960s, and extended his expertise to undercover CIA agent John C. Hunt in the Paris offices of the CCF. Jabra would be involved in *Aswat* and other projects of the CCF including the 1961 Rome Conference; was courted as editor of the short-lived journal *Adab* and then the CCF's highly influential Arabic magazine, *Hiwar* (Beirut, 1962–1967); and served as a frequent contributor of poetry and prose to *Hiwar*. Jabra was also an active translator with the State Department (and partly CIA)-funded Franklin Books project, and in 1963 translated William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* into Arabic, a decisive literary event that influenced many Arab writers. Faulkner was promoted throughout the CCF global network, with his particular take on American modernism proving deeply influential to authors publishing in CCF journals, including Chinua Achebe, Tayeb Salih, and Gabriel García-Márquez. Jabra would likewise translate T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," with Eliot's modernist influences on Arabic poetry widely evident.

Shifting from a search for petronovels, we can begin to see how oil and modernism are mutually constitutive global phenomena. Methodologically, we can then link the production of Iraq's oil wells to the production of Tayeb Salih's novels or Badr Shakir al-Sayyab's poetry, via the institutions that make up this Cold War oil sensorium. In addition to highly influential modernist magazines, the CCF put on art exhibits and concerts of classical and twelve-tone music, and hosted important conferences, including the 1961 Rome Conference for the Arab Writer and the Makarere Conference on African Literature of English Expression in 1962. Monica Popescu, writing on the African context, argues for an understanding of the Cultural Cold War in this period as a battle of the conferences, and indeed the Soviet-funded Afro-Asian Writers Association and the Chinese-funded Afro-Asian Writers Bureau put on a number of high-profile international conferences in the wake of Bandung. Richard Wright attended Bandung as an observer for the CCF, and the reader of his *The Color Curtain* encounters a fascinating portrait of Afro-Asian solidarity as Wright's petro-fueled plane touched down in

Cairo for more passengers and to refuel, and then took off again, heading east to Bandung, gesturing to the carbon footprint of the Cold War.

"It is not for the modern Petroleum Industry to interrupt your dreams," Shell oil told readers of *Encounter* in 1954. And yet come 1977 in Casper, Wyoming, it was just this sort of petro-fueled modernism that led American poet Allen Ginsberg to write "T. S. Eliot Entered My Dreams": "'And yourself,' I said, 'What did you think of the domination of poetics by the CIA.'" While Eliot finds it all "petty," the first-person narrator channels Ginsberg as he decries "the repression of indigenous cultures in favor of Western-oriented big business scientism based on Petrochemical Affairs, oil Bigness," taking form later in the piece as "the oily Seven Sisters." It was "As if oil had a voice — of 'right-minded men' thoughtful conservative well fed & well paid all dependent on petrochemical culture — exquisite executives and exquisite academicians — all with clean hands.'" Eliot wonders what the alternative was? "I mean," Ginsberg writes, "that in bankrolling cadres of intellectuals — thru research foundations, Intelligence Agencies, social theorizers, international relations experts, essayists, speakers, convocations and networks of International Literary magazines like *Encounter, Preuves, Der Monat, Quest* — There was one in South America too, wasn't there? — the CIA promoted and subsidized and organized and encouraged — put energy into — nourished — sustained artificially — the development of an ethos, language, set of thought-forms & economic-cultural presumptions based, to put it crudely, on the oil Industry. At the expense of a natural non-monopolistic economy, Culture & Poetics." This economy "might have to be developed out of a decentralized energy base — Solar, Wind, Tree-Crop Agrarian, individualized Cultures," and it will be "labor-intensive."

The field of Middle Eastern Studies finds its Cold War history in this sensorium of "oil Bigness." Ginsberg invites us to speculate as to what kind of decentralized artistic and intellectual labor might enter into a sensorium with Solar Energy, or Wind. At Bandung, there was an epochal call to historicize Afro-Asian culture before the four-hundred-year longue-durée of European colonial and imperial rule. Before oil and coal, before the East India Companies, while the winds drive Sindbad at times against his will, and other times to murderous profit; a long history of solar-based storytelling can be located in the figure of Shahrazad as she awaits her fate, the suspense dictated by the sun's approach upon the horizon.

---

[1] Arbella Bet-Shlimon. 2019. *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk*. Stanford University Press: 5.

About the Authors

Elizabeth M. Holt is a literary historian and serves as Associate Professor of Arabic and co-director of the Middle Eastern Studies program at Bard College. Author of *Fictitious Capital: Silk, Cotton and the Rise of the Arabic Novel* (Fordham UP), Dr. Holt is finishing a new monograph on Arabic literature in the Cold War.

How to Cite

Holt, Elizabeth M.. July 6, 2022. "Oil Sensoria." *Global South Studies*. Originally published in Jadaliyya: https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/42665. Accessed date.

By Kerry Bystrom | July 6, 2022

"Postcolonial studies and Cold War scholarship treat contemporaneous cultural phenomena, yet they have seldom crossed paths."[1] This astute observation forms the starting point for Monica Popescu's recent monograph, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (2020). The book proceeds to show just how interwoven the processes of decolonization and the Cold War were in 20th-century Africa. Carefully stepping around binary categorizations and employing the postcolonial and Cold War studies lenses to African literary history as well as to specific African texts, Popescu documents the entangled imprint of these two phenomena. She tracks how African writers and intellectuals both fell prey to and shaped wider Cold War cultural politics — internalizing, navigating, confronting, rejecting, and refashioning colonial legacies and the imperialisms of the US and the USSR, defined as "diachronically overlapping and synchronically interweaving forms of (neo)colonial domination" (13).

Through supple readings and reflections on disciplinary developments, the book underscores the centrality of a dual lens methodology not only for African but also for wider Global South contexts. Doing so, it makes a strong case for attending to and widening the circle of scholarship which takes this approach. More than once in the book, Popescu poses the Cold War lens of analysis as a kind of "chemical treatment" or developing solution which helps that which has been in Global South literature all the time suddenly appear. In a sense, her book is itself a kind of developing solution. It creates space to see and recognize actors and archives, questions and absences, and a range of recent and emerging scholarship addressing them.

This roundtable, following from a seminar held at the 2021 Annual Conference of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) on the same theme, brings into constellation a set of short essays that take up and push further — in more or less explicit ways — the key questions and methodologies at stake in Popescu's book. *At Penpoint* highlights a number of ways of reading and historicizing African literature in light of Cold War contexts: Popescu lays out the dichotomy of modernism and realism, and how "Cold War superpowers claimed these modes of writing as part of their aesthetic systems" (67); she details instances of literary revolution and resistance, reading deeper nuance where postcolonial scholarship would miss "the relation between cultural forms of resistance to imperialism and the Cold War" (3). Popescu provides a template for (re)reading the conjunction of temporality and affect in literature — "affective temporal structures," she terms it — in order to reveal concealed or emergent local/global sociopolitical frameworks. Finally, she challenges the singular foci of both postcolonial and Cold War studies on their singular antagonists. In her words, "the study of Cold War literary production needs to orchestrate different perspectives in order to attend simultaneously to direct forms of imposition, structural forms of influence, and the sometimes small, and other times comprehensive, networks writers were able to create in order to disrupt established

geopolitical configurations" (33). The essays that follow engage these themes and reading practices. They also bring out a number of perspectives which do not always rise to centrality in *At Penpoint* but are crucial to understanding the historical and literary textures of the Cold War/decolonization period and remain with us.

Conversation at the ACLA seminar turned to methodology: Sangeeta Ray, thinking on the nuance between the categorizations of *international*, *transnational*, *global,* and *world* literatures, deemed Popescu's intervention "a different practice of world literature." In the essays that follow, contributors examine scholarly arrangements and read closely individual texts under the rubric of this "different practice." This roundtable provides perspectives on method and comparativism (including archives, levels of analysis, even the transformation of empire and the guises of imperialism during the decolonization/Cold War years), on the inclusions and exclusions of our scholarly fields (how do we classify subcategories of postcolonial studies, and how might we recalibrate area studies to more fully understand our objects of analysis), on questions of genre and form (specifically modernism and realism as related to global markets and politics — which is specifically to say, to *oil* — shaped by Cold War era geopoltitics). Several of the essays that follow take Popescu's directive to "revisit African texts through a Cold War lens to see how they directly or obliquely mark the presence of overlapping imperialisms" (15). Rereading instances of literary resistance or dissent — what Popescu terms "literary renderings of imagined futures and the genealogy of ideas of revolution" (26) — these essays consider "competing imperialisms" (11) represented by the US, USSR, and elsewhere. They ask: what does it mean to reread African literary history (and the history of ideas and literary theory in the wider global South) through the lens of the Cold War? How do we capture the workings on and in culture of the intertwined and overlapping modes of imperialism at play during the Cold War? Other essays in this roundtable are concerned with sources, archives, and categorizations. They ask: what works and archives need renewed attention when linking the Cold War and postcolonial studies and what new works and archives can be brought to light? What forms of knowledge has the Cold War and its aftermath enabled or blocked?

The Essays

This collection begins with petroleum: Beth Holt's "Oil Sensoria" springboards from Amitav Ghosh's "petrofiction," and expands to ask, what actors, networks, and complexes were producing the literary archetypes of the cultural Cold War? Holt's piece powerfully shows a need to bring the carbon economy and public-private partnerships into the picture. The author argues that the focus on US/CIA support of cultural production obscures the role of the oil industry in building and circulating the Modernist paradigm prized by one side of the Cold War—obscuring, as Holt puts it, how "oil makes novels and poetry." The essay ends by asking what literature produced by another kind of economy, one more renewable and in tune with people and the planet, might be. Mathias Iroro Orhero's contribution, "Artistic Commitment and Minority Resistance: Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint* and Niger Delta Poetry," pits "oil multinationals" against the poets of the Niger Delta. Following Popescu's reading of Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, Orhero demonstrates how a generation of minority poets starting in the late 1970s navigated and repurposed the categories of committed literature available during the Cold War (modernism v. realism), creating a "hybrid realist mode that draws from indigenous aesthetic forms" to confront the oil industry as well as the nation-state. The essay asks, what

does “committed” writing look like (in terms of genre, style, and form), and what levels of analysis does responsible scholarship need to attend to (local, regional, national, continental, international, transnational)?

Carolyn Ownbey’s contribution, “Against Empire: Reading Anticoloniality across Cold War Divides,” similarly picks up a reading practice modeled in *At Penpoint*. Employing a comparative method, Ownbey delineates unexpected alignments between dissidents on either side of the Iron Curtain: Václav Havel and Mongane Wally Serote. The essay asks, how can we get beyond a simplified vision of the West as the prime imperial power and instead read across the imperialism of the West and the USSR, bringing them together in a kind of counterpoint? How to uncover their confluences and cross-cutting modes of operation, as well as shared visions of resistance? Lauren Horst’s “Cold War Seductions in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*,” likewise draws a picture of layered imperialisms. Horst explores Ama Ata Aidoo’s 1977 novel,a text usually read as a reflection on European (neo)colonialism, as at once a reflection on the forms of “soft power” deployed by the superpowers during the Cold War to persuade members of the “Third World” to embrace one or the other alignment. In Aidoo’s novel, Horst reveals, the divergent perspectives of protagonist (laser-focused on the ills of colonialism) and narration (providing a wider scope of geopolitics and Cold War configurations) exist in productive tension. Bringing a spotlight onto these sometimes-overlooked practices of persuasion or “seduction” of Third World individuals, she also raises the important questions of how to come to a critical consciousness of such power plays and how to determine who ultimately is paying the bill.

Turning focus to Asia, the final two essays included in this roundtable consider transnational movements and their implications for how we might rethink postcolonial taxonomies. Mingqing Yuan’s contribution, “Kofi Awoonor and China: Travels of Afro-Asian Poetry in the Early 1960s,” expands the archive and an overwhelming scholarly focus on key conferences and journals to understand how connections between writers were made across First, Second, and Third worlds. Tracing the travels of Ghanian poet Kofi Awoonor (aka George Awoonor Williams) and his poetic works (via publication and via oral performance/recitation), Yuan demonstrates that “literary exchanges and knowledge sharing through Afro-Asian solidarity left traces in one way or another on all involved actors.” Finally, Jini Kim Watson’s “Thinking Through the Other Cold War: Transpacific and Inter-Asia Approaches,” asks what happens when we shift the methodological questions and observations about disciplinary formation and knowledge production Popescu raises to different regions — in this case Southeast and East Asia. Suggesting that analysis of the regions has focused more on the Cold War than on imperialism, Watson maps different ways an analysis of the “*postcolonial* Cold War” is developing in and opening up East and Southeast Asian studies. Triangulating three separate approaches, Watson shows how they grapple with the outlines of an imperial power exercised from the US and not Europe, even while rejecting the continuing hegemony of US theory and posing Southeast and East Asian sites as producers of knowledge.

These six essays use Popescu’s text as a launching pad, exploring new ways of reading and categorizing texts and thinking through literary and cultural studies since mid-century more generally. It is difficult to overstate the stakes of reframing postcolonial and Cold War studies in our present historical moment. As scholars and as consumers of culture, we have been underserved by preexisting notions of Global South, postcolonial, and Cold War cultural

modes and formations. We conclude, then, with the provocative questions Popescu raises at the end of her monograph:

The Cold War ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and so did its cultural impact. This is what we used to assume. Yet what if the knowledge paradigms specific to the global conflict linger on, shaping the intellectual instruments we use to explain literary phenomena today? What if the impact of the two world-systems persists beyond the demise of one of the superpowers, manifesting it-self in the triumph of neoliberal capitalism and the preservation of the West's cultural and aesthetic structures? What if the ways we understand literature today — the canons inscribed in anthologies, the prizes bestowed, the forms of criticism preferred — are at least in part shaped by the remnants of the Cold War? (186)

---

[1] Popescu, Monica. 2020. *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War.* Duke University Press: 2. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

About the Authors

Kerry Bystrom is Associate Professor of English and Human Rights and Associate Dean of the College at Bard College Berlin, A Liberal Arts University. She is the author and co-editor of works including *Democracy at Home in South Africa* (Palgrave MacMillian 2016), *The Global South Atlantic* (Fordham UP, 2018), *South and North: New Urban Orientations* (Routledge 2018) and *The Cultural Cold War and the Global South* (Routledge 2021).

Carolyn Ownbey is Assistant Professor and Chair of English, Communications, and Literature at Golden Gate University in San Francisco. Her scholarly work focuses on anticolonial literature and performance, new media and protest, and theories of democracy and citizenship. Dr. Ownbey has essays published in *Law & Literature*, *Textual Practice*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, and *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, among others.

How to Cite

Bystrom, Kerry. July 6, 2022. "Introduction: Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.